

Tilburg University

The epic conflict

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THE EPIC CONFLICT

A prediction is a statement of what happens in the future. It may be right or wrong. The most interesting predictions are challenging the human mind to the extreme, up to the point that they are not accepted as an actual forecast. However, as time comes by, research findings often have changed the human opinion. What once seemed impossible is then expected to take place within months instead of decades. Overdoing is a typical human activity. As a case in point, we would like to consider the sportive activities in the month of November 2003. Is FRITZ dethroning Kasparov once and for all? Are the best-five programs of the 11th WCCC in Graz, Austria all playing above the human World-Champion level? These questions are often asked by not only specialists but the public.

Stretching the spectrum of predictions somewhat more, George Bernard Shaw¹ (1917) remarked: "All great truths begin as blasphemies." Indeed, in the 1950s many people, even researchers, could not imagine that computers would ever outplay human beings in the game of chess. For them, the complexity of the game was as the Holy Grail which should be hidden for always. Now, the Grail has arguably been dug up and is almost in our hands. New York and Graz will show us where we stand and what the prospects are.

The epic conflict is between man and machine, between believers and disbelievers, between scientists and chess players. At this place, I would like to single out one person in particular: Garry Kasparov. He shows time and again that he is prepared to test his skill against the latest scientific progress. So far, Kasparov has played three serious matches (1996, 1997, and 2003) with a fourth coming up in November 2003 (see p. 213 of this issue). The venue will be New York. No other chess players have staked their reputation so many times.

Moreover, Kasparov himself believes that silicon thinking will eventually surpass his own. In future events he expects that in Man vs. Machine matches the human grandmasters may be proud when they score 0.5 point out of six games. However, Kasparov does not indicate any time frame. So far, for the real progress.

¹ G.B. Shaw (1856-1950). *Annajanska* (1917), p. 262.

The next stage is the virtual progress. The X3D company has given FRITZ a brand new outlook, namely “a play in the third dimension”. Kasparov, playing with 3-D glasses, will see a virtual chess-board floating between him and the screen. Nobody knows what impact this will have on his play. Yet, the experience is very interesting and Kasparov is seriously preparing himself for the match.

Immediately afterwards, FRITZ will play in the 11th World Computer-Chess Championship in Graz, Austria. There may be outsiders, but it is expected that the tough fight for the ICGA World Computer-Chess Champion title will have five serious contenders: JUNIOR, SHREDDER, FRITZ, BRUTUS, and DIEP. Many believe that after New York and Graz the public opinion will be definitely altered: laymen and scientists will then be convinced of the fact that computers no longer play at the level of the human World Champion but that the best five outperform this World Champion by a large margin.

This forecast brings us back to other games and the scientific discourse. Alongside the 11th WCCC there will be the 8th Computer Olympiad and the 10th Advances in Computer Games Conference, all in Graz. Many games will be played in the Olympiad ranging from Dots and Boxes to the ultimately challenging game of Go. The Conference will pay attention to a similar variety of Games. There are 24 contributions, of which six are on Chess and six on Go; the remaining twelve cover games such as Checkers and Lines of Action as well as Oshi-Zumo and Wythoff games. A complete program can be found at <http://www.cs.unimaas.nl/icga/acg10/>.

In an earlier issue (March 2003, p. 61) we have outlined the programme of the Graz events. As a service to our readers we enclose a leaflet with relevant information on all these events. Obviously, we hope to see you all in Graz, the Cultural Capital of Europe 2003. May the city later on remember with pleasure and respect the heroic conflicts then played in the world of games.

Jaap van den Herik

Photo by ChessBase



GARRY KASPAROV TESTING THE X3D TECHNOLOGY

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