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## EQUAL AT LAST

For all its antiquity, chess is still remarkably limber. Whether one refers to the game or to its masters, one finds that they can somersault, caracole and generally caper along with the best. Not so very long ago, chess was so much a human game that even the possibilities of a mere contrivance like a computer playing it was ruled out. (Was not there something disreputable, too, in a subject which could be traced back to von Kempelen's fraud and other exotics?) Inequality was by nature.

Not too many kilogames later (and a kilogame takes about a year), say in 1983, it became necessary to some not only to state that chess was a human game but to define it in anthropocentric terms: anything played according to the rules of chess, but not by human beings, is *not* chess. Inequality was by definition. We merely mention it here as the first step in the chess masters' complicated manoeuvre. The next step is now upon us, some ten kilogames later still. Whatever the merits of the new rulings, the very wording is significant: "Computers may ... play in tournaments ..."; "Humans ... will not refuse to play against the computer", as you may read in this issue. It may not seem a major victory, but it is quite an achievement in non-discrimination: if it plays according to the rules of chess, chess it *is* and never mind the substance of the player; silicon is as good as carbon. Equality is now by decree.

Needless to say, your Editors welcome the decision at least to the extent that it reunites status and strength. In human-only days, these coincided in the chess world. They then drifted apart, status dwelling with the old strength and ignoring the new force of chips, which proved a striking new powerhouse. We now gladly see proper new status awarded to proper new strength.

In legal terms, the new ruling makes statute law, a codified body of rules claiming to govern the subject. Now it is notoriously difficult to grasp any new statute in its full consequences. Critics are given a free hand to discuss the probable consequences as they foresee them, which mostly will depart from the consequences that do materialize. This goes for the small world of computer chess and its Manila ruling no less than it goes for the European Community and its Maastricht treaty.

Statute law requires to be supplemented by a generous helping of common sense as laid down in case law. One such amusing case has been constructed by Dap Hartmann in *Computerschaak*. Assume a computer was entered legally for the generally human Dutch Championship. Also assume that the two top players of this tournament are entitled to enter the zonal tournament. The case arising is: say the computer wins the Dutch Championship and so earns a place, is its entitlement to the zonal tournament automatic or is it discretionary? If discretionary, the organization may refuse to let the computer participate and in doing so reneges its rules for zonals. If admission is mandatory, the consequence is that the entire path up to the World Championship is open to our machines.

Another critic, David Levy in this issue, foresees grave difficulty for those gifted programming amateurs whose contributions the chess world excludes at its peril. There is an obvious tension between the fees that can in reason be levied from amateurs, he argues, and those that can be charged to a prosperous manufacturer. Even if that tension is smoothed out, it is feared that the registration fees might be felt as an unproductive extra burden on manufacturers who are already sponsoring their national federations and tournaments in many countries. Could not this have the very adverse effect of less sponsorship, resulting in fewer tournaments?

And how will our human masters and grandmasters react? This is not a matter of case law, but of chess economics. So far, the past few years have seen great eagerness for human professional players to participate in mixed tournaments. But: "Computers ... will be counted for rating purposes." This may well curb some human enthusiasm. Losing against a computer will lose precious ELO points. Many participants so far have not been exactly overawed by the computers and have won with fair ease. Still, playing 'for real' and risking ELO rating points is a different kettle of fish altogether, not guaranteed to bear the attractive smell of success.

And while we are speculating: will there be an orderly, measured pace of progress towards the higher echelons? Should we not rather surmise that, once it is known some program is a fair contender at the World Championship level, somebody will arrange for that computer to play the World Champion, without benefit of previous formalities?

Possibly the winner of such a pairing may also lay claim to a World Championship ... Regrettable? Irregular? Does it really matter in a world with no dearth of contenders for that title? One more cannot harm the game. Your Editors would be confused but not too unhappy with the irregular procedure, so long as it keeps strength and status closely together.

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