

ChessBase Cafe

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Help for the Handicapped

The quest to create the greatest chessplaying machine is well documented. Giant mechanical computers that mated with a rook to programs using slips of paper, to microcomputers that had less power than your cell phone. Today the quest continues and every year the mighty machines get mightier.

The strongest of them on cutting edge hardware have been battling the world's strongest humans to a standstill for the past few years. Kasparov and Kramnik have radically different styles but neither of them has been able to reach a plus score against Fritz and Junior.

These are the same programs you can buy two clicks away from here for less than fifty bucks. This is something like a beginning karate student being able to practice against Jean-Claude van Damme. As far back as 20 years ago, programs like Sargon and ChessMaster running on a Commodore 64 were already stronger than 99% of human players. This is why as the first commercial chess programs started to get stronger, work began in order to make them dumber!

As handy as it is to have an in-house Grandmaster for training games and analysis, being crushed like an aluminum can game after game after game can get old very quickly. Even Grandmasters don't get much joy playing blitz or rapid games against PCs these days. If you're always getting wiped out you will get depressed and stop playing. And even if you are bereft of pride and continue smacking your head against the computer wall forever, such one-sided games don't teach you very much, other than how to take a punch.

An ideal sparring partner is one who plays a little better than you do. You get the chance to make your own plans and survive an error here and there. It's also nice to test your tactics in attack instead of just in defense. You want to be able to win often enough so you keep your morale high. Basically this means losing as often as you can take it.

This is where the handicap features in Fritz (and family) come in. Making super-strong chess programs play badly isn't as easy as it sounds. If you fix the time the machine thinks per move its performance will vary greatly depending on the hardware. Limiting the search depth is a better stratagem, but this can make the computer alternate very strong moves with idiotic blunders.

These days you can not only chose the strength of your Fritz opponent but you can customize its playing style in many ways. This way you can face a variety of

opponents without leaving your comfy chair. We'll take a look at the various handicap options and then get to a few of the immense pile of questions that has been building up. Here is the "Handicap and Fun" dialog box under the Game – Levels menu.



Here you see the wide range of options available to customize your handicapped opponent. The main ones are playing strength and blunder range, which are quite effective. Some of the others don't have very obvious effects, or aren't particularly useful. Stick with the predefined opponent list on the left for a while. As you might imagine, "Moron" is the weakest.

If you want to practice your defense, move the "king's attack" slider all the way to the right. I always recommend increasing the "blunder range" rather than decreasing the playing strength. This better emulates human play. Leave the "Piece play" boxes empty. They can really make the program look silly, even in the predefined personalities. For example, "Assassin" likes to move its knights, but in my tests this led to this little gem: 1. d4 d5 2. Nc3 Nf6 3. Bg5 Nbd7 4. Nf3 Nb8??

Your opponents can turn out to be annoyingly inconsistent on occasion. During my testing a "Reckless" opponent simply allowed me to capture its knight with a pawn on move four. That's not something an 1800 would do on his worst day. Overall I think the handicap modes play much worse than the rating slider

indicates.

If you are serious about your training regimen, keep track of your opponents and your record. As always, HOW you lose is also important. Analyze your losses and adjust your opponents to test your weaknesses.

There are two other interesting handicap tools in Fritz, “Friend Mode” and “Sparring.” The Help file describes those quite well. Both of these will play stronger chess than the “Handicap and Fun” modes described above.

The E-mailbag

Every month I get a question or two asking about ChessBase versions for the Macintosh or Linux. I covered these questions and revisited them in ChessBase Café articles two, three, and four (in the [ChessCafe Archives](#)), including links to various alternatives for Mac-heads. Quite a few readers sent in suggestions and discussed emulation successes and failures.

Question I enjoy your columns. My question is with the analysis of the games by Fritz 8 (Full Analysis). The annotation always seems to start after the moves get out of the opening book. Is there any way I can get Fritz to annotate from move 2 or 3. I tried closing the opening book but it still does not annotate the first 6 or 7 moves. I want to understand things right from the beginning. Any way for Fritz to do this? – Thanks, Sudeep Surender

Answer Don’t wave the white flag just yet. There are two answers to this query. The first is that getting advice from even the strongest computer engine on the opening phase of the game is not going to help you understand much. It’s better to leave the opening reference on so you can see what human masters have played previously. It will automatically insert similar games into the annotations and you can see how they played differently.

The second thing is that in full analysis mode Fritz will add analysis annotations only when it sees an improvement of sufficient magnitude, which you specify in the threshold. Unless there are blunders in the first few moves it’s unlikely Fritz will have much of an opinion about the initial opening moves. It’s not going to think that 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 is much better than 2.Nc3, for example. If you want to understand openings, trust the database of human games. Setting the threshold to zero should help some.

Question Even though two icons appear (one for each), whichever one I click on brings up the Shredder 7 start screen to play or go to Playchess.com. Though I can change the engine once in the program, the Fritz 8 identity seems to have been pushed aside by Shredder. Even when I went on Playchess it entered as Shredder regardless of which engine was the playing engine. Even in CB 8, “go to Fritz” brings me to Shredder. As for Fritz, it didn’t take kindly to the apparent intrusion as it convincingly whopped Shredder in the mini 2 game blitz match I tried! – Bruce Murray

Answer Never get Fritz angry. As you found out, it will take over your computer, organize all your files and order books from Amazon.com on how to make your own sausage and beer. All the programs of the same Fritz family generation will “push aside” a previous program. It does this to make sure you’re getting the newest version of the interface and so your Playchess.com account details aren’t erased. Since the interface is the same, only the engine really matters. It just changes the name when you load the program. Any interface updates are rendered irrelevant since you can install the latest version online by logging into Playchess and going to the Help menu.

Note that after you enter the program you can switch to a different interface version by going to Tools – Options and the Version tab. Make the change in the “GUI Version” drop-down. You probably won’t notice any difference. Oh, and new 3D boards come with each new program.

As for the reboot/crash you described in your second question, cut here for length, that sounds like something serious with your system. If you have all the latest updates there is no recognized crash bug I’m aware of. As with any fatal crash, try it again as the only program running, try it again without unnecessary hardware attached, then try it again after upgrading to Windows XP! If it’s happening regularly under XP you may have a memory flaw or CPU overheating issue related to how much stress a chess engine puts on your computer. (Although any PC that can’t handle hours, even days, of 100% CPU usage is simply flawed and should be replaced by the manufacturer.)

Question Hi Mig, My Q is concerning the new 5 DVD endgame set from ChessBase. How do I access the Fritz 8 engine update? And how do you use the new Tablebase 3.0 engine in ChessBase 8. I know this is 2 Q’s but could you answer them anywayz. Thanks for the cool column. – Regards, Rory in Ireland

Answer And here I thought ChessBase made good progress with the instructions on this DVD set. They aren’t nearly as cryptic as back in the good old days, when you may as well have tried to follow them to bake cookies. There is also a readme file on the DVDs with some additional info. The Fritz engine update will install automatically when you run the setup/install programs on the DVDs.

I believe this is also the case with the new Tablebase 3 engine for ChessBase 8, but you can manually drag and drop it from the fourth DVD into the Engines subdirectory in the ChessBase program directory. (This is also true for the Fritz update, which consists of one updated file.) It works the same as the old version, but the new one has the capability to access the new six-piece databases on the DVDs. It shows the lines in order of best play, just like a regular engine. It will only display lines if the position on the board is in the tablebases. There are a few trivial limitations about how it displays some six-piece lines and these are described in the DVD packaging.

Engines under ChessBase 8 cannot access the giant six-piece tablebases in the search, only in the Tablebase 3 engine. The Fritz engine update allows it and Hiarcs to use them in the search. This can have a dramatic effect in rook and pawn endgames, as we recently saw in the game Anand-Shirov from Corus Wijk

aan Zee! Fritz 8 (and other engines) without access to the new bases were happy to play the same losing move Shirov played and evaluate it the same as the drawing moves. And that's with five-piece tablebases. Of course with the six-piece bases it showed all the drawing lines perfectly.

Question Hi Mig! How do I import my own icons for the databases in Chessbase 8.0? – Craig Sadler, Canada

Answer You can't. I wanted to do this for the files that accompany my ChessNinja newsletters but you can't import new icons. CB 8 comes with plenty, including loads of flags, but that's it. Maybe for CB 9?! Being able to edit the Playerbase would also be great.

Question 1 A friend of mine says that Fritz 8 saves the games he watches (Kibitzes) on the Playchess server in a directory called "My Kibitized Games" (or something similar - I forget the exact name of the directory he mentioned), but my copy of Fritz 8 only saves the games that I actually play on the server ("My Internet Games") and the games I play against the Fritz 8 program. How can I configure Fritz 8 to save the games in which I Kibitz?

2. I received one free one year on the Playchess server as part of my purchase of Fritz 8. How much will one year on the Playchess server cost whenever my free one year expires? – Thank you, Ron Dotson, La Crescenta, California

Answer I'm betting you have a whole file of kibitized games just waiting to be found! The file "MyInternetKibitzing" should be in your default ChessBase folder, which is most likely in the "My Documents" folder. There isn't a way to turn this off or on to my knowledge. Try running a search on your machine for a file with that name. You can also go to File – Save Game As to put the game you're kibitzing into the database of your choice.

A serial number is available at <http://playchess.com>. The price for a year is currently 29 Euros, or 37 dollars and is good for two accounts. Even if you don't have a Fritz program you can go there and download a Playchess client and pay for a serial number online.

All the ChessBase software described by Mig in this column, as well as many more ChessBase programs, are available in the [ChessCafe Online Catalog](#).

Mig wants your questions!! Send it along and perhaps it will be answered in an upcoming column. Please include your name and country of residence. Yes, I have

[a question for Mig!](#)

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