An elitist game

Apart from improvements in speed at the higher playing levels, there is not much more that the average chess player could possibly want from the best of today's chess computers. And as Tony Harrington notes, when it comes to new products Fidelity and Novag are way out in front.

By the time you read this the World Micro Computer Chess Championship (WMCCC), held this year in Glasgow, will be over. A full report will appear in December's PCW.

Without denigrating other suppliers' machines, the World Championship looks at the time of writing to be a two horse race between the Novag and Fidelity programs.

Fidelity won last year's WMCCC, but the Novag Super Constellation has had some very encouraging player-tournament results and the battle looks to be unpredictable.

I have not yet had the opportunity to explore the Super Constellation, but I have, however, had Fidelity's Budapest program on trial for the last few weeks. Very impressive it is, too.

The Fidelity Elite Budapest program is a very expensive piece of equipment, costing nearly £600. It's a fine, auto-sensory wooden board and pieces with a manual comprising more than 50 pages!

But for those who don't have that sort of money, hang on for a bit, Fidelity will be launching the Sensory 12, priced at £295. In September, which will have the same program as the Elite (Budapest), and most of the features (though it will be a sensor board, not an auto-sensory board - in other words, touch-sensitive, and not automatically activated by magnets in the base of the pieces).

I was unable to establish whether or not it will have the Elite's glorious Blitz chess capability. It certainly won't have the full Blitz feature, since the little LCD display on the Elite, which, in Blitz games, shows the clocks for both players, is not on the Sensory 12.

The month of September will also see the release of Fidelity's Elegance Chess Challenger, the Fidelity Experimental. The Elegance will, however, have a removable EPROM program, so users will always be able to have the latest

'Experimental' program.

For anyone under county strength who is keen on Blitz chess, the Elite AS (Budapest) is worth its weight in gold. Games are decided on time as well as on over the board play. The program has a very sure grasp of positional and tactical play and its blunders are as rare as they are surprising; but when they come, the blunders look as grotesque as any oversight made by a player. In complex mid-game positions, playing almost instantly under Blitz conditions it repeatedly found interesting attacking moves. In defence, it was resourceful. See the Blitz games (1 and 2) for evidence of its style in attack and defence.

My major criticism is that despite the pseudo sophistication of a voice chip, which computer speaks its way right through the game - even at Blitz chess - Fidelity is still sticking with a ludicrously complicated method of communication between user and processor.

Firstly, there are twelve little pins which form a sort of keyboard. You have to press the extreme left-hand pin labelled 'game control', pick up and put down Black's Queen, which lights the LCD at d8, then press the pin marked 'cl' for 'clear'. This clears out the memory and sets all the values to zero ready for a new game. It has to be done each time you want to play a new game. To get to Blitz mode there is another rigmarole to be gone through. Pressing the 'b' pin, ('level') gets you into 'level-setting mode'; picking up the pawn on b2 and replacing it lights the LCD on that square and causes 'HO:05' to come up on the LCD display screen. This is your Blitz clock time.

It is adjusted by repeated pressings of the 'b' key to add minutes to the time, the 't' ('take-back') key to add 10 minute chunks and the 'st' (time control/position score/level setting) pin to add one to nine hours to the clock. After all this, you are still not finished. There still remains the specifying of the computer's clock time, which is independently set. Pressing the pawn on b2 and replacing it once more changes the display to CO:00 and the pin pushing has to begin again to set this clock.
The process, once understood, is quick enough. It also has the great merit of allowing you to set the two clocks independently. This is useful not just for 'time-handicapping' but for strict fairness, too, like all chess computers, the Elite 'steals' a little of its opponent's time during the piece moving operation — and in Blitz chess a half a minute or so over a whole game can often be the decisive factor.

But I am against the business of POKEing values into the processor by a whole host of complicated board-and-keyboard combinations. For a start, it makes the process of learning to use all the functions available on the Elite AS unnecessarily complicated. And for a second, at that price I see no reason why a decent set of symbolic keys couldn't be provided for one-touch implementation of all the features.

I would also have expected one or two additional functions to be present in such an expensive machine. It is perfectly possible to step back, move by move, all the way to the beginning of a game, but there is no facility for stepping forward. There is no 'reply' key, possessed by even the crudest home chess programs, which will automatically replay the game, move by move, from the beginning.

The voice chip is an unnecessary extra which can be irritating or embarrassing, depending on your mood.

Those are the grumbles. But on the positive side, the Elite AS (Budapest) program (not to be confused with the ordinary AS program which predates Budapest and is definitely weaker) must, with the possible exception of the Super Constellation, be the best thing on the market at the moment.

**Game No 2: Player versus Fidelity. Game time limit: five minutes each (Blitz chess). This time the Elite opts for a weak defensive line and pays the price.
**

1. e2 e4  c6 12  b2 e3  Nf6 13
2. Ng1f3  Nbd6 14  e4 x5  Bb7x5
3. d2 d4  cx4 15  O-o  e5
4. Nf3 x4  g7 16  Rd1d1  e4
5. c2 x4  Bb5 17  Ndf4  g6
6. Nc3 x4  d6 18  Bf4 x4  Nfd7
7. Rd1 e2  O-O 19  Bd4 f6  6 x5
8. h2 x3  Be7 20  Qd6  Bf5
9. Be6 x3  Qb8 21  Qh8  mate.
10. Qd1g2  Bg7x3  1-0.

**Games section**

The last two Micro Chess games have featured David Levy giving a superb demonstration of how to play against a computer (August & September issues).

This month's game is a sort of 'computer's revenge'. The Super Constellation is playing Black against five-times US Women's Champion Diane Savereide. Unlike David Levy, Diane entered into an ultra-sharp and highly theoretical opening variation. At the crucial moment she adopted a faulty continuation of the attack, easy to do in a very complex position. The Constellation took over the initiative and pressed its advantage home in ruthless fashion. Although the human played into the computer's hands by her choice of opening, this is nevertheless one of the most impressive games I have ever seen by a commercial machine.

**White: D Savereide. Black: Super Constellation. (Level 7). Notes by Grandmaster Dr John Nunn**

1.  e2-e4  c7-c5
2.  Ng1-f3  d7-d6
3.  d2-d4  c5xd4
4.  Nf3 x4  Nf6-e6
5.  Nb1-c3  e7-a6
6.  Bf1-c4  e7-e6
7.  Bb4-b3  b7-b5
8.  Bc4-c8  f7-f6
9.  e4-e5  dxe5
10.  fxe4  Bxe4

(In this opening White stakes everything on a quick attack. If the assault founders White stands to lose the ending because of the weak pawn at e5.)

11.  Bc1-e3  Nf6-d7

(That is why the new move of the game, 12... Nbd6-c6 and 12... Bc5xd4 are the accepted alternatives, but the Constellation strikes out on new paths.)

13.  Qd1-h5

(All that is now is not necessarily good, and here White missed the chance to play 13 Rfxf7! Kxf7 14 Qd1-g4. The only reasonable defence is)

14... Qd8-b6, but then 15 Kg1-h1 gives White a tremendous attack for the sacrificed rook. After 15... Bc5xd4 16 Be3xd4 Qb8-c6, for example, 17 Nc3-e4 leaves Black in dire straits.)

13  g7-g6

14  Rf1-f4?

(This move is a serious error. White should have played 14 Kg1-h1 Nb6-c6 (14... Qd8-b6 is met by 15 Rf1-f4, since the queen has given up the chance to move to g5 as in the game) 15 Be3-g5 Bc5-e7 (after other moves Black is crushed by the sacrifice Nd4xe6) 16 Nd4-f3 with dangerous threats on the kingside.)

15  Nb8-c6

16  Kg1-h1

(If this Black promises a forced win, but there was no real improvement.)

16  Bh6-h4

17  Bc3xd4  Qd8-g5

(A profound move, I commented earlier that an end game would favour Black and this move, which forces the exchange of queens, isn't easy for a machine to find.)

18  Qh5xg5  h6xg5

19  Rh4-g4  Nc6xd4

20  Rg4xd4  Nxd7xg5

(White can regain the lost pawn, but only at the cost of allowing Black to develop a powerful counter attack.)

21  Ra1-e1  Ne5-g6

22  Rd4-g4  Ra8-d8

23  Rg4xg5  Ng6-f4

(The relative activity of the two bishops is the key to the position. White's cannot move, while Black's exerts terrible pressure against g2. Already 24... Rd8-d2 is threatened.)

24  Re1-f1  Nf4xg2!

(White could have saved the game by this little combination finishes the game.)

25  Rg5xg2  Rd8-d2

26  Rf1-g1  Rf8-d8

(White cannot meet the threat of 27... Rd2xg2 28 Rg1xg2 Rd8-d2.)

27  Bb3-d5  Rd8xd5

28  Rg2xg7+

(28... Rc3xd5 Bb7xkd5 White is utterly paralysed.)

29  Kg1-g2  Kg8-f8

30  Rg7-g8+  Kh8-e7

31  Rf1-g1  Rd5-e5+

32  Resigns

(White is mated in two more moves.)