

Computers and Correspondence Chess

by FM Alex Dunne

In the 1920's Capablanca and Lasker and others decried the death of chess by draw. The game, they declared, was about played out. Between evenly matched opponents, a draw was the inevitable conclusion. They were wrong.



Eighty years later the obituary of correspondence chess is being hawked. Nigel Short, reviewing the excellent USSR Correspondence Chess Championships book *Red Letters*, informs us, 'n this day and age, alas, correspondence chess is destined for extinction.' Computers, the doomsayers tell us, have done that form of chess in. This report is an attempt to check the alleged corpse for signs of life.

The first signs seem fatal enough. Postal play in the United States has decreased as the cost of a post card has gone up. That statistic seems unarguable, but misleading. At one of the last chess camps I worked at there were 110 students – and all but one, a 45-year-old, had email addresses. If you can't fight 'em, use 'em. The dominant form of correspondence today is email. And, superficially, it's 'free'. But are the computers still lurking out in the silicon. Of course. Many veterans of postage warfare have retired, unwilling to fight against players using our 'iron friends', as Kasparov has referred to the computers. John Knudsen has remarked, 'You'll know there is a problem of computers and cc when everyone is rated 2450.' But that remark contains an important truth. Players who are using a computer soon see their ratings soar to the master level. This protects everyone under master rating, for what kind of a pervert using a computer would deliberately keep his rating in the 1500 range so he could beat average players? No, the computer users will have hefty ratings. Ninety-five per cent plus of correspondence players don't have to fear the iron monsters.

The masters and especially the older ones still fear the beast. Hans Berliner, Fifth World Correspondence Chess Champion, wrote recently, 'I have sort of independently come to the conclusion that CC is about played out. Anyone who loses a game with [White] clearly does not know much about chess, how to use databases, or does not have a state of the art computer.... Contrary to deploring this state of affairs, I find it most interesting as I believe we are very near understanding chess in its nakedest form, the complete truth.... As an engine for world class competition, I believe CC is about played out.'

I may be wrong, but I don't believe computers can play like Tenth World Champion Vytas Palciauskas in the following recent correspondence game against Hans Berliner. Let the reader decide for himself.

□ **V. Palciauskas (2558)**

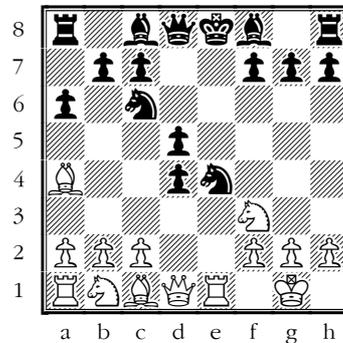
■ **H. Berliner (2751)**

Ruy Lopez, C80

ICCF 50 WCJT, 2003

Notes based on those of Hiarcs8

1.e4 e5 2.♘f3 ♘c6 3.♙b5 a6 4.♙a4 ♘f6 5.0-0 ♘xe4 6.d4 exd4 7.♞e1 d5 (D)



8.♙g5

Hiarcs gives 8.♘xd4 ♙d6 9.♘xc6 ♙xh2+ 10.♜f1=, missing 10.♜h1±.

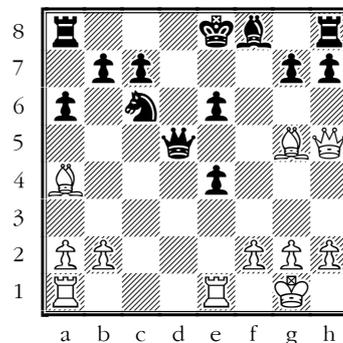
8...♞d6

Hiarcs suggests 8...f6 9.♘xd4 ♙c5 10.♘xc6 ♙xf2+ 11.♜f1 as equal, but O'Kelly-Hasenfus, Correspondence 1938, has shown this position to be strongly in White's favor.

9.c4 dxc3 10.♘xc3

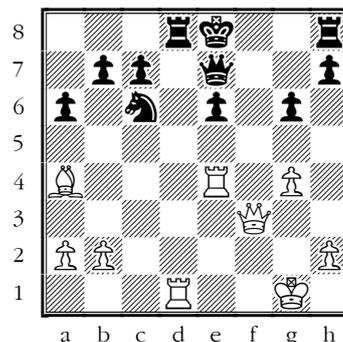
Hiarcs: White is better.

10...♙e6 11.♘xe4 dxe4 12.♘d4 ♞d5 13.♘xe6 fxe6 14.♞h5+ (D)



Hiarcs: White is better.

14...g6 15.♞h4 ♙c5 16.♞ad1 ♞f5 17.g4 ♙xf2+ 18.♞xf2 ♞xg5 19.♞xe4 ♞e7 20.♞f3 ♞d8 (D)



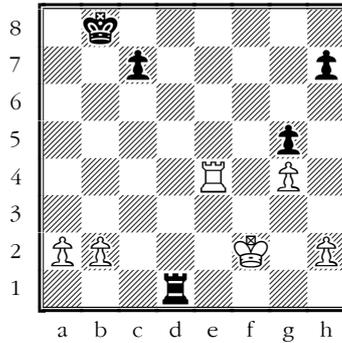
21. ♖xd8+

Hiarcs: 21. ♖xc6+ bxc6 22. ♖xd8+ ♔xd8 23. ♖xe6+ ♖d7 24. ♖xc6+ ♖c8 25. ♖xa6+ ♖b8 26. ♖b5+ White is winning.

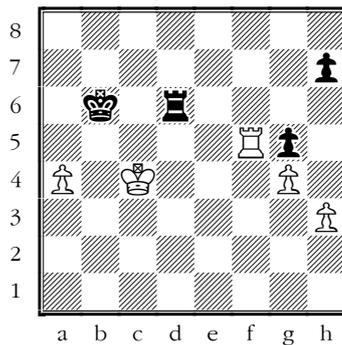
21... ♖xd8?

Hiarcs: 21... ♖xd8 22. ♖c3 ♖f8 23. ♖xc6 ♖f7 24. ♖d3+ ♖c8 25. ♖xb7+ ♖xb7 26. ♖b4+ ♖a7 27. ♖e3+ ♖a8 28. ♖e4+ c6 29. ♖xc6+ ♖a7 30. ♖b6+ ♖a8 31. ♖xa6+ ♖a7+ 32. ♖b6 ♖xa6 33. ♖xa6+ ♖b7 34. ♖xe6 ♖a8 35. ♖e7+ ♖c6 36. ♖xh7 and White wins.

22. ♖xc6+ bxc6 23. ♖xe6+ ♖d7 24. ♖xc6+ ♖c8 25. ♖xa6+ ♖b8 26. ♖e4 ♖d1+ 27. ♖f1 ♖d8 28. ♖xd1 ♖xd1+ 29. ♖f2 g5 (D)



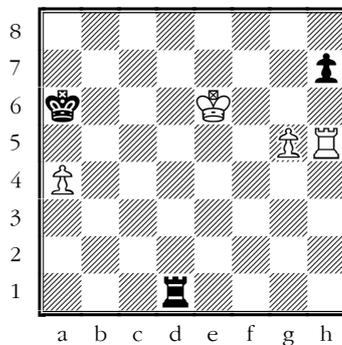
30. ♖b4+ ♖a7 31. ♖b3 c5 32. h3 c4 33. ♖a3+ ♖b6 34. ♖e3 ♖b1 35. ♖d4 ♖xb2 36. ♖xc4 ♖d2 37. ♖b3+ ♖c6 38. a3 ♖d1 39. ♖f3 ♖d6 40. a4 ♖b6 41. ♖f5 (D)



41... ♖h6?

Hiarcs: White wins. 41...h6!?

42. ♖xg5 ♖xh3 43. ♖b5+ ♖a6 44. ♖h5 ♖g3 45. g5 ♖g1 46. ♖d5 ♖d1+ 47. ♖e6 (D)



1-0

And one further note about chess being played out. The winner of the tournament that the above game came from was Mikhail Umansky. His opponents were the eight living world correspondence champions. His final result of 7-1, +3 =1 with

White and +3 =1 with Black, does not seem to indicate chess is being played out at the top level.

Max Zavanelli, Secretary of International Correspondence Chess Federation/US, has his own views – 'Regarding computer usage, for research purposes it is invaluable. Jon Edwards was recently interviewed on [Chess FM](#). He mentioned that he uses the databases to study his position. He finds 200 or so games with the position, plays through them, and then knows the position so well that he goes on to win... I am making a great career out of defeating computer-based players! [Using computers] means that the average player can increase his play for periods during the game from 1700 to 2350-2400. The quality of the games is improved. Research on openings and improvements of databases and technology marches on from the age of Ruy Lopez to Deep Blue.' But the main edge is that the computer eliminates obvious tactical blunders. 'The computers today cannot handle unbalanced positions. It has no strategic sense. It is merely a calculator, easily outwitted because it is witless.... Get yourself Fritz. See what Fritz recommends. And then use your own judgment...'

□ **M. Zavanelli**

■ **G. Livie**

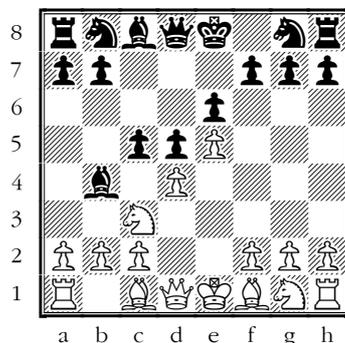
The French Winaver; C17

Reg Gillman Memorial email, 1999

Notes by Alex Dunne

NB: I do not want to suggest by using this game as an example of Max Zavanelli's play that his opponent was using a computer (even though this would be perfectly legal).

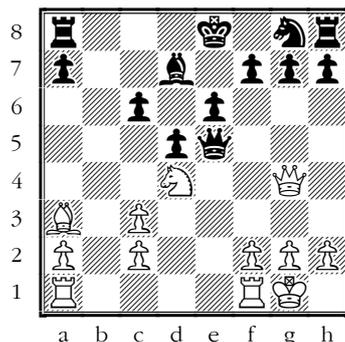
1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.♘c3 ♗b4 4.e5 c5 (D)



5.♘f3

A reminder: 5.a3 is not mandatory. Zavanelli's line is a gambit: an unbalanced position for material.

5...cxd4 6.♘xd4 ♖c7 7.♗b5+ ♗d7 8.0-0 ♘c6 9.♗xc6 bxc6 10.♖g4 ♗xc3 11.bxc3 ♖xe5 12.♗a3 (D)

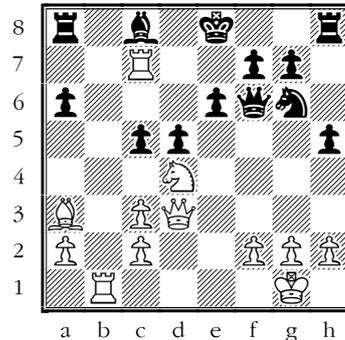


White has achieved his goal: an unbalanced position; Black has his pawn.

12...h5 13.♖f3 ♖f6 14.♗d3 ♘e7 15.♞ab1 ♘g6

Black cannot castle - 15...0-0 - as 16.♞b7 ♞fd8 17.♙xe7 ♗xe7 18.♘xc6 wins for White.

16.♞b7 a6 17.♞fb1 ♙c8 18.♞c7 c5!? (D)

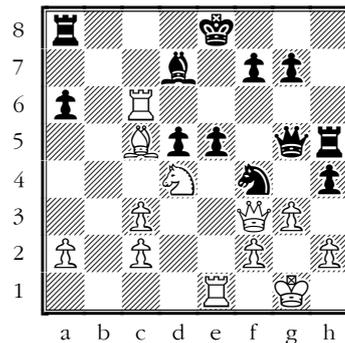


Black gives the pawn back and the complications grow, but all White's pieces are active.

19.♙xc5 ♗d8 20.♗g3 e5 21.♞c6 h4

21...exd4? loses: 22.♞e1+ ♙e6 23.♞exe6+ ♗xe6 24.♗xg6+ ♖d7 25.♗xe6#

22.♗e3 ♞h5 23.♗f3 ♘f4 24.♞e1 ♗g5 25.g3 ♙d7 (D)

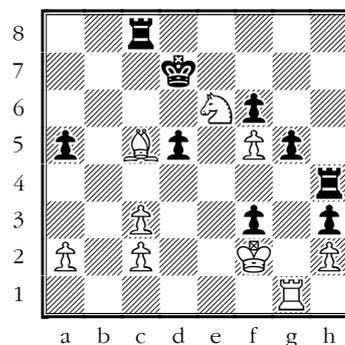


26.♗xf4! White simplifies into a won ending.

26...♗xf4 27.gxf4 ♙xc6 28.♘xc6 e4

The sting at the end: 28...♞c8 29.♘xe5 ♞xc5 30.♘d3+ wins for White.

29.♘d4 g5 30.f5 ♞c8 31.♙b4 h3 32.f3 ♞h4 33.♗f2 ♗d7 34.♞g1 f6 35.♘e6 a5 36.♙c5 exf3 (D)



37.♙d4 ♗e7 38.♞e1 ♞e4 39.♞xe4 dxe4 40.♘c5 ♞b8 41.♘xe4 ♞b5 42.♙c5+ ♗d7 43.♘xf6+ 1-0

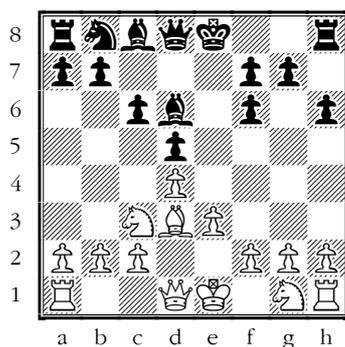
Finally, nearly forgotten in the struggle of man versus machine is the Reynolds Challenge. Robert Reynolds, a strong ICCM who does not use computers issued a challenge in 1987, proposing a match for a small stake against any computer playing at the standard (postal) rate of 10 moves in 30 days. No computer team has accepted this challenge to date. Would Reynolds win such a challenge? He and many knowledgeable correspondence players think it would be no contest. And how does Robert play? Here is a game from the 15th World Championship Finals. Robert notes that this game may also be the last world-class correspondence game played without computer assistance.

White: R. Reynolds

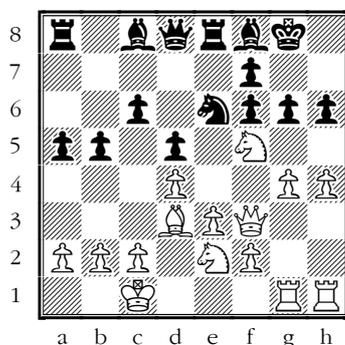
Black: A. Cayford

15 World Championship Final

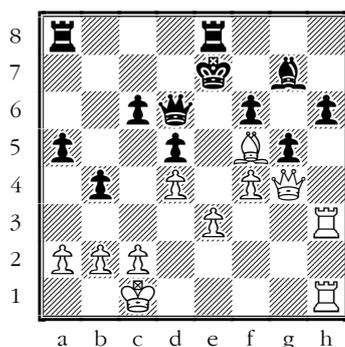
1.d4 ♖f6 2.♗c3 d5 3.♙g5 h6 4.♙xf6 exf6 5.e3 c6 6.♙d3 ♙d6 (D)



7.♜f3 0-0 8.♗ge2 ♜e8 9.g4! b5 10.♗g3 ♗a6 11.0-0-0 ♗c7 12.h4 ♗e6 13.♗f5 ♙f8 14.♞dg1 a5 15.♗e2 g6 (D)

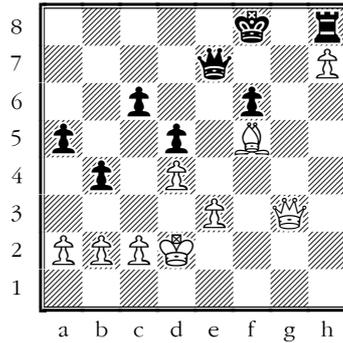


16.♗eg3! b4 17.♗h5 gxh5 18.g5 ♗xg5 19.♜xh5 ♙xf5 20.♙xf5 ♙g7 21.♞g3! ♜f8 22.hxg5 fxg5 23.f4 ♜d6 24.♜g4 f6 25.♞gh3 ♜e7 (D)

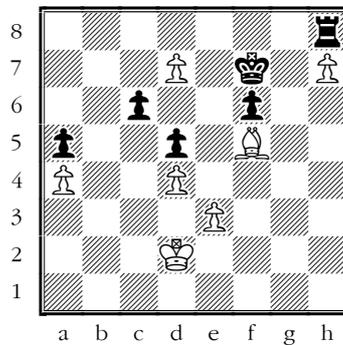


26.♞xh6 ♙xh6 27.♞xh6 ♞h8 28.fxg5 ♞af8 29.♜h3 ♞xh6 30.gxh6 ♜d8

31.h7 ♖h8 32.♗g3 ♕f8 33.♗d2 ♖e7 (D)



34.c3! bxc3+ 35.bxc3 ♕f7 36.a4 ♕f8 37.♙d3 ♖d8 38.c4 ♖e7 39.c5 ♖d7
40.♗f4 ♕g7 41.♙f5 ♖e7 42.♗g3+ ♕f8 43.♗d6 ♖xd6 44.cxd6 ♕g7 45.d7
♕f7 (D)



46.e4 dxe4 47.♗e3 ♕e7 48.♗xe4 ♕d6 49.♗f4 ♕e7 50.♗g4 ♕f7 51.♗h5
♕g7 52.♙g6 ♖d8 53.♙e8 ♕xh7 54.♗g4 ♕g7 55.♗f5 ♖a8 56.♗e6 ♕f8
57.♙g6 ♖d8 58.♙e4 1-0



Let the OTB players quake. The correspondence players are still ready to challenge the rise of the machines.