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by Dr. Axel Schumacher

Chess Programs for Pocket PC and Palm devices

Intro

When I started to write this review, I estimated that it will take me a few days to do so. How was I mistaken. I thought, I could test the handful of programs quite easily, without knowing that over 60 chess programs for Pocket PC and Palm already exist. How much of you would have guessed that (especially only a minority shows up in reviews or in chess discussion fora)? The speed of development is currently huge and many new programs and even more chess engines are ported to Pocket PC and Palm. I was always eager to have a program such as Arena or Winboard on my PDA to play with different chess engines. However, this is not such a trivial task. Windows for Pocket PC and Palm OS are not fully compatible to other operating systems. For example, a chess engine can't easily run as .exe under an Pocket PC GUI. Usually it has rather to be incorporated as dll, so that it will be difficult to just import many of the hundreds of chess programs to these platforms.

I included all Pocket PC programs as well as all Palm programs I could find (I didn't rank chess programs that do not contain an chess playing engine, nor chess clocks or training software, although the new Pocket CT chess trainer from Convekta is excellent). It is a long discussion (mostly quite fanatic) what platform is better to use. (Of course, if you're resolutely anti-Microsoft (and many are), it's a no-brainer. Some people would die for Palm devices whereas others would only use Pocket PCs. In recent years I would have agreed that it probably doesn't matter much which platform to choose, however, in the past two years, the development for Pocket PC was simply much better compared to the Palms. You have a better compatibility with Desktop PCs, the graphics are much better, higher speed and more and more programs are coming out for Pocket PCs, which is already reflected in this review, where we have >37 programs for the Pocket PC, but only 21 programs for Palm devices (this was the other way around only 2 years ago). When you want to chose a device from scratch mainly for chess playing purposes, you may have to consider several points. Pocket PC's are multitasking (you can run several programs at once), whereas Palm devices are intended to run one program at a time (although Palm OS 5.0 introduced some multitasking ability). Palm devices are cheaper, but if you want also to play online, your way has to go over the Pocket PC platform. In the moment I would certainly buy a Pocket PC, no question about that. When you pick a PDA, you should also remember to choose a device with long battery hours, since chess programs are very demanding in power consumption.

Another interesting development came with the announcement of the first Palm emulator for Pocket PCs 'StyleTap'. That means that you can run most of the Palm chess programs also on your Pocket PCs. I tested the program since it's pre-release quite some time ago and found only 2 or 3 programs that were not really compatible. Of course, not all Palm functions are available with the emulator, for example the use of bluetooth. It's important to note that when dealing with any applications that have data files (e.g. PGN files), there's actually no way to transfer data off the device other than cutting and pasting via the clipboard, which you can do only a line or so at a time. StyleTap doesn't support HotSync or conduits and can't access your Pocket PC's network stacks, either, so Internet access through the emulator is out. This would probably be of interest only to those wanting to use Palm chess programs to connect to a chess server. StyleTap runs in two video modes: a full-screen mode that expands the Palm OS display to take over the width of your Pocket PC screen, and a reduced-size mode that opens up a Palm OS box of 160 by 160 pixels (on QVGA) or 320 by 320 pixels (on VGA) in the middle of your screen. This works out fine,

since all Pocket PCs have screens greater than 160-by-160. Performance is noticeably faster in the reduced-size mode, which is good, because that mode looks better anyway; in the full-screen mode on a QVGA device, fonts look distorted and chess pieces are really not that pretty to look at.

But back to the programs. So, the first question most users ask: "Is there a best program?". Well, that is difficult to answer, since different persons have different demands on a software. Some people need a very sophisticated chess program that can do nearly everything, from board setup, book selection, variant analysis, test suites with a strong engine. Other don't have the time for this and need only a simple program that makes it possible to play a quick game when waiting for the bus. Then again, other people, may require nice graphics with all kinds of fancy add-ons etc... For all these players, a different program might be best. For that reason, I sorted the programs into different categories:

Pro: Programs, which are suitable for strong players who needs a strong opponent and who want to analyze games with it.

Fun: For not so serious games, which are mostly targeted at people that just want to enjoy playing without any competitiveness involved.

Casual: Programs, that are suitable for the beginner and average payers, which doesn't have the time to indulge too much into chess playing.

For each category and several subcategories I determined a winner depending on 100 ! different program attributes:

Clock display, Board design, Board design customization, Board size/adjustability, Piece design, Piece customization, Piece Animation, 3-D set, Layout customization, Menu/Layout, Hashing, Coach watching, Web support, Hint button, Select database, Select book, Book customization, Opening book style, Setup board, Save Game, PGN support, reads text in pgn/saved game, Annotation/Comment move, Game details, Search database, Search online database, Tablebase support, Connects to FICS/CB/ICC, Online Chess, Help file, Chess rules, Career mode/Tournament, Player statistics, Level adjustment, Dynamic level adjustment, Supports time/move, Diff. Personalities, Engine strength, Additional engines, Analyze/Infinite analysis, Fischer time, Predefined time controls, Time customization, Different time/player, Bullet, Tournament time control, Database, Tutor/Trainer, Replay moves, Sound effects, Support DGT-board, Announce move, Highlight last move, Highlight legal moves, Move entering, Adjustable replay speed, Adjustable Pondering, Show threat, "Go!" command (Move now), FEN support, Adjudicate game, Drills/Puzzles, Takeback, Writes logfile, Delay move, Customizable notation, Detect draw, Shows nodes/s, Displays thinking, Blindfold Chess, Displays evaluation, Resign, Insert Nullmove, Shuffle/Fischer Chess, Rated games, Autoplayer, Benchmark, Testsuites, epd support, Payout, Vision Trainer, Stop engine, Change engine style, Learning, Safe energy, Displays Depth, Stealth mode, Support landscape mode, Displays material balance , Additional features/bugs, Autoanswer on/off, Demo available, Fun factor, Auto off, Anti human mode, Chess set editing possible, Displays board coverage, Chose next best move.

Each of these attributes had to be weighted differently for obvious reasons. For example, the ability of a program to save games or the board design per se are important, yet, the ability to have a Benchmark feature will probably be not important to most users.

Originally, I wanted to include additional attributes, however I found that some functions were unfortunately not available in any PDA program. For example, none of the programs offers the possibility to read text-files from PGN-databases that are not part of a game PGN file itself. That means that it is not possible to read, for example, the introduction of a PGN e-book. Also other nice theoretical features couldn't be found, such as an integrated chess clock (very useful), a chess piece editing tool, engine-engine matches (tournament mode) or a mate solving tool. Additionally, it is rather unfortunate, that the only Chessbase product available for Pocket PCs (Pocket Fritz 2) doesn't understand the Chessbase format! Why? I don't know. Also, it would be nice to have a

program that would be able to connect to the Playchess server from Chessbase. Again, Pocket Fritz doesn't support that either (yet). Anyway, the detailed achieved point listings for each attribute for each program are available in a separate Excel sheet, which can be downloaded here:

[Excel File \(66 kb\)](#) [Interactive Excel File \(465 kb\)](#)

So, who are the winners? In fact, I think we have an overall winner, which clearly outperforms all other programs. For some people it will not be very surprising, since the program won other software-awards already in the past. It is the German program PocketGrandmaster from Kai Skibbe and Frank Schneider. Unfortunately, the program is only available for the Pocket PC. The best Palm program is a different program, nobody else than the famous Chessmaster program.

Winner Pro for Pocket PCs: PocketGrandmaster v2.1

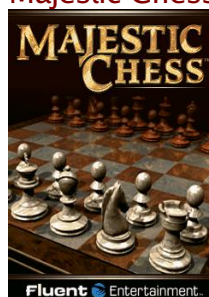


Winner Palm: Chessmaster



However, although Chessmaster scored highest of all Palm programs, many of the programs points are derived from different fun-factors. The 'serious' player, who is more interested in playing a good chess-program may want prefer either Chess Tiger for Palm or Hiarcs for Palm, both excellent programs. However, Chessmaster doesn't get the Fun category. There is one program which scored even higher. Although it is not as well known as Chessmaster, it doesn't have to hide from it. Part of it's developer team came originally from Chessmaster.

Winner Fun: Majestic Chess (Pocket PC)



Yet, some people don't have the money to afford such programs. Luckily, a number of free programs are already available for the Pocket PC and for the Palm. So, the winner in the category freeware are:

Winner Pocket PC: CEBoard



Winner Palm: OpenChess

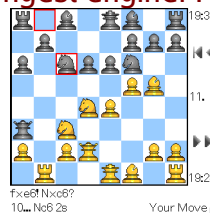


I have to mention especially the program CEBoard, developed by Alain Zanchetta. It is truly an excellent program, better than the majority of commercial products (see list below). I recommend to everybody to check out his great program. For people who can afford a commercial program, but don't want to spend many dollars, we also have a winner in the Budget category:

Winner Budget (Pocket PC): Pocket Grandmaster Light

Other players are only interested in the playing strength of a chess program. Recently, several extremely strong chess engines entered the PDA field, so it is not so easy anymore to say which program is really the strongest. Yet, for quite some time now the strongest program was clearly HIARCS from Mark Uniacke. Other engines, such as Fruit, Toga or even the latest Thinker may have a similar playing strength. Unfortunately, not enough games are available to make such a conclusion. Yet, we know many results from these engines from the desktop platform. To a certain degree this may help in establishing the playing strength of an engine on a Pocket PC/Palm. For example, you can expect that an engine running on a 624Mhz device will be about 15 times slower than running on a 2 GHz Athlon, which would indicate about 150-200 Elo difference, assuming a branching factor of 2.5 - 3, and about 50 to 65 Elo per ply (source: Albert Silver). Although engines like Fruit surpassed Hiarcs 9 on the PC, they still have to prove their superiority on the Pocket PC/Palm. Also, the engine in Hiarcs Palm is an improved version to Hiarcs 9 and an even better version is in work. So, for now the winner of the category strongest program belongs to:

Winner strongest engine: Hiarcs (Palm)



The last winner we have is coming from the category online-play:

Winner Online-Play: Intelli Chess (Pocket PC)



Further down you will find the complete ranking list of all tested engines. Each program comes with a detailed review on it's own, viewable in either a html list, a pdf file or as winword document. The review is really detailed and hence the file size is relatively big. So, depending on your internet connection, the download may take from a few seconds (DSL) up to several minutes (56k modem). I tried to show some example games from all programs to demonstrate the playing style of each engine. Most games were played by me against the programs on a Dell Axim X50 624MHz (Palm programs with StyleTap emulator). I had a chess engine running as Kibitz (either Toga II or Shredder 9), to avoid big mistakes on my side. The games were annotated by me and Fritz 8. If the evaluation of Fritz showed a value of 6 pawn units difference for more than 6 consecutive moves, the game was adjudicated accordingly.

Here it goes to the Review:

 [REVIEW ,63 Chess Programs HTML website \(size: ~5 MB \), may take time to load](#)

&

 [REVIEW, 63 Chess Programs DOC \(size: 3.21 MB\)](#)

&

 [REVIEW, 63 Chess Programs Acrobat PDF \(size: 3.16 MB\)](#)

Here you can also find the short ranking list of all tested programs:

Rank	Program	Developer	Platform	Points
1	PocketGrandmaster v2.1	K. Skibbe & F. Schneider	Pocket PC	195
2	CE Board v2.1.589.1	A. Zanchetta	Pocket PC	173
3	Pocket Fritz v2.01	ChessBase	Pocket PC	171
4	Majestic Chess v1.10	Fluent Entertainment	Pocket PC	167
5	Chessmaster v1.56	Ludigames/Gameloft	Palm	161
6	Chess Tiger v15.2	Christophe Theron	Palm	156
7	HIARCS v9.5	Mark Uniacke	Palm	156
8	ChessGenius v1.7	Richard Lang	Pocket PC	130
9	ChessPartner v1.02	Lokasoft	Pocket PC	129
10	Chess Genius v2.22 (Also marketed as 'On Hand Chess')	Richard Lang	Palm	116
11	PocketChess Deluxe v2.51	Handmark/Pocket Express Inc.	Palm	112
12	AxChess v1.4.09	P.H. Nguyen	Pocket PC	105
13	Kasparov Chessmate v1.0.9	Hexacto	Pocket PC	100
14	Pocket Grandmaster Light	K. Skibbe & F. Schneider	Pocket PC	96
15	Pocket Crafty 2004 v1.0	Pocket Chess Champion	Pocket PC	88
16	Pocket Crafty v1.0	Robert Hyatt	Pocket PC	85
17	Intelli Chess Bundle v1.72	Intorine	Pocket PC	85
18	Silke Chess v1.20	SilkeSoft	Pocket PC	84
19	Mastersoft Chess v1.0	Mastersoft	Pocket PC	83
20	Intelli Chess v1.72	Intorine	Pocket PC	79
21	Graduate Chess v1.27	Noel Dillabough	Pocket PC	72
22	ChessToGo v1.4	Learning ToGo	Palm	70
23	MobileThinkerBoard v0.1.0009	Lance Perkins	Pocket PC	68
24	OpenChess Pack v2.01	O. Richter	Palm	66
25	OpenChess v2.01	O. Richter	Palm	64
26	Mobile Chess v2.00	ID Gaming	Pocket PC	60
27	The Travel Collection v1.41	Earthlink	Pocket PC	57

28	Chess King v1.1	B. Whitby	Palm	56
29	Championship Chess v6.2	Dreamquest	Pocket PC	53
30	Palm Chess v2.03	Synctel Software	Pocket PC	53
31	Championship Chess Pro v.6.2	Dreamquest	Palm	52
32	Naum v1.8 light	Alex Naumov	Palm	52
33	Chesscapade v1.52sv1.24	Superscape	Pocket PC	52
34	Cascata (Star Chess) v2.00f	Purplesoft/Cascata/ZingMagic	Pocket PC	52
35	Naughty Chess v1.0	Bettybytes	Pocket PC	52
36	Cascata Chess (Star Chess)	Purplesoft/Cascata/ZingMagic	Palm	51
37	Palmarov v1.0	JSJ Micro LLC	Palm	50
38	International Chess v1.0	HiPocket	Pocket PC	47
39	Valentin Iliescu Chess v.2.0	Valentin Illiescu	Pocket PC	47
40	PocketChess v1.0	Tinyware	Pocket PC	43
41	Chroma Games Chess v1.8	Astraware	Pocket PC	40
42	Double Chess v3.1	NonVi Games Inc.	Palm	39
43	Chroma Games Chess 1.8 for Palm	Astraware	Palm	39
44	HellChess v1.2	HellHound	Pocket PC	37
45	9.95 Chess v4.6	9.95 Soft	Pocket PC	37
46	9.95 Chess Palm	9.95 Soft	Palm	36
47	HandChess II v1.1a	Chris Seeger	Palm	32
48	Microsoft Chess	Microsoft	Pocket PC	27
49	Chess Quantum v3.6	Wideknowledge	Palm	25
50	Ultimate Chess v2.0	Handbots	Pocket PC	23
51	Ultimate Chess v1.6	Handbots	Palm	18
52	Pocket Gnu 2004	Pocket Chess Champion	Pocket PC	17
53	BtChess v3.0r15	IS complete Inc.	Palm	17
54	Gnuchess v3.21	Eric Thiebaut	Pocket PC	13
55	Transparent Blue v1.05	H. Iwata	Palm	6
Not ranked	Rampart Chess for Pocket PC	Rampart Games	Pocket PC	nd
Not ranked	Rampart Chess for Palm	Rampart Games	Palm	nd
Not ranked	Midnight Chess v1.0a	Midnight Programmers	CE Palmtop	nd
Not ranked	Suicide Chess	CronoTech	Pocket PC	nd
Not ranked	Suicide Chess	CronoTech	Palm	nd
Not ranked	Rook's Revenge	Astraware	Pocket PC & Palm	nd
Not ranked	Beamable Chess		Pocket PC	nd
Not ranked	OlmChess	OlmChess.com	Pocket PC	nd