

After the sudden death of Kurt Kispert on August 14, 2020, I contacted my friend Rob van Son from Amsterdam. In September 2001 he was in Vienna for a few days and visited Kurt on Sunday, the 23rd of that month. Of course, to see his beautiful collection of chess computers, but also to play some games between Rob's Berlin Pro 68020 and Kurt's Fidelity Elite Avant Garde V10. Now, in retrospect, a historic visit! Due to a lack of time that evening, the interview took place much later. We want to bring this event to the attention of all of you one more time. Kurt deserves this, because at the end of the nineties he was a pioneer with his website and forum that brought together all interested parties in the world of computer chess and the chess computer lovers in particular! We will be eternally grateful to him ...

Real art comes from Vienna!

***** says Rob van Son *****

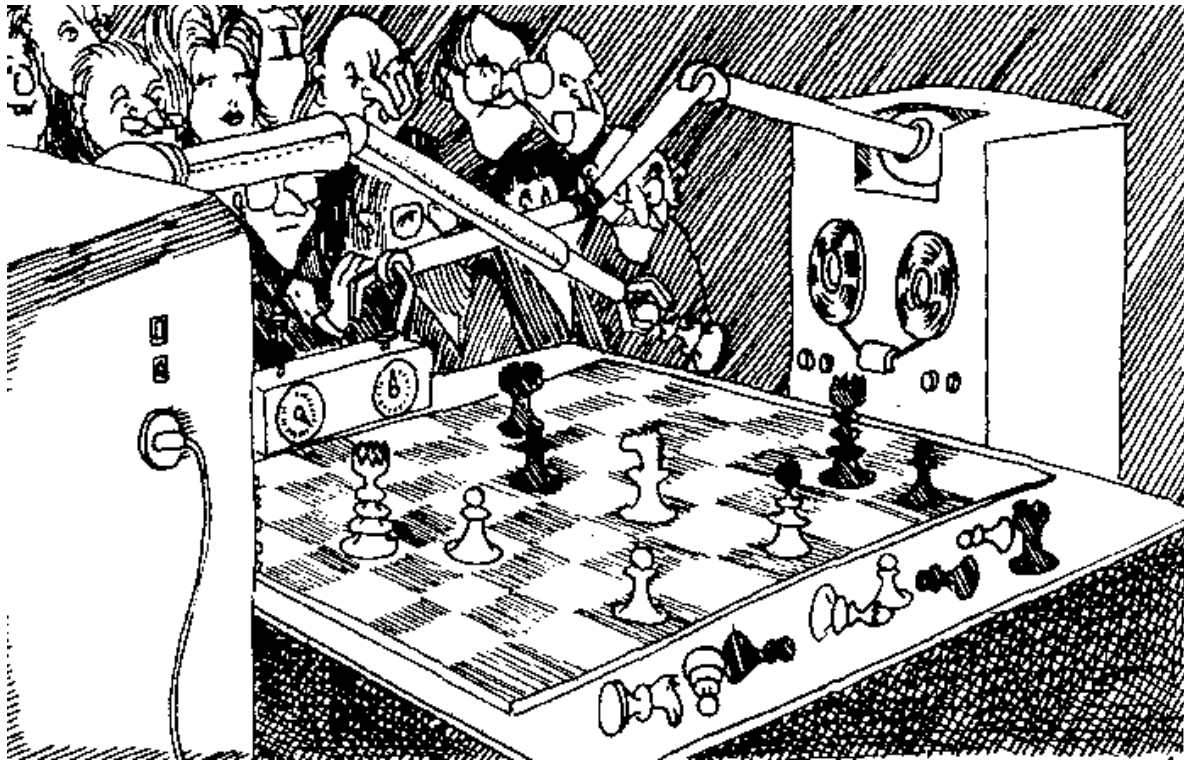
In September 2001, I went to Vienna for a couple of days and visited the many works of art located in this beautiful city. One of the highlights was my visit to Schönbrunn palace. In 1770 the Hungarian baron and engineer Wolfgang von Kempelen presented there the very first chess machine, the Turk, to the empress Maria Theresa. Looking around in the splendid rooms I tried to imagine the atmosphere of that time.



Kurt Kispert proudly shows his collection of beautiful chess computers. From small to large, there are almost 100! The large wooden ones are nicely placed next to each other and the smaller ones fit perfectly on the top shelves.

Besides visiting the many sights, I had an appointment with a man who is in the possession of many marvellous chess machines for a long time now. I am talking about the Viennese chess computer collector Kurt Kispert. I met Kurt through his unique website, which is entirely specialized in everything in the field of chess computers. Nowhere on the internet have I been able to find a site that can even remotely touch the transparency, many-sidedness and beauty of Kurt's Schachcomputer Homepage! Do you want to know what an old chess computer looks like or what its elo-rating is? Are you interested in the history of computer chess? Do you want to share your opinion with other chess computer lovers? These are just a few of the questions that a visit to Kurt's site will provide a quick answer to.

Kurt Kispert would have liked to participate in the 1st CSVN computer Gebruikers (users) tournament but found the distance between Vienna and Leiden too large. He did not give up, drummed up his many chess friends in Germany, Austria and Switzerland with the help of his question and answer forum on the internet, and in 2001 organized the first D.A.CH. Oldie-Computer-Tournament in the South-German city of Kaufbeuren.



While I was visiting him, he hardly gave me the time to drink my coffee, because he wanted to take me as soon as possible to the room where all his chess computers were lined up. I was very much impressed with his splendid collection of masterpieces consisting of many rare antique computers with wooden boards and read contacts, the very first series of Chess Challengers, chess robots that can independently carry out their moves, and many more marvellous machines.

In everyday life the 43-year-old Kurt works as a financial administrative employee in a Viennese hospital and spends almost all his spare time on his wide-ranging hobby. Judging from the number of e-mails he receives every day it is safe to say that Kurt has a worldwide chess computer fan-club. So, I took the opportunity to ask this outstanding collector and webmaster a few questions.



**You need a big wall unit made of shelves, if you keep collecting!
Look at the beautiful suitcases in a row. You often do not have better
protection and it's very handy to keep all the accessories together.**

Kurt, what made you start to play chess and how old were you at the time?

I learnt to play chess from my father. He was an occasional player and taught me to play chess when I was ten years old. By practicing a lot, over the years I came to play chess at the level of an average club-player. I would be lying however if I said I have become a strong player.

Did you have any other hobbies at the time?

I had many hobbies in those days, but my favourite pastime was football. I played football at an advanced amateur level until, in 1980, I was forced by injuries to start playing in a lower division. After this I participated in several other sports like tennis, table tennis and running. I no longer have time for these things because my present hobby, computer chess, has become very wide-ranging and time consuming.



An Applied Concepts/Chafitz with ARB Sargon 2.5 is a must for Kurt!

How did you get interested in computer chess and was there at the time much to see and buy in Vienna or elsewhere in Austria?

My interest in computer chess was roused in 1985 when a colleague gave me a Mephisto III chess computer, against which I often played and regularly lost. He gave it to me when he bought the new Mephisto Exclusive Amsterdam from the Schach Mattes Company in Vienna, for 27.521 Austrian Shilling (2000 euro).

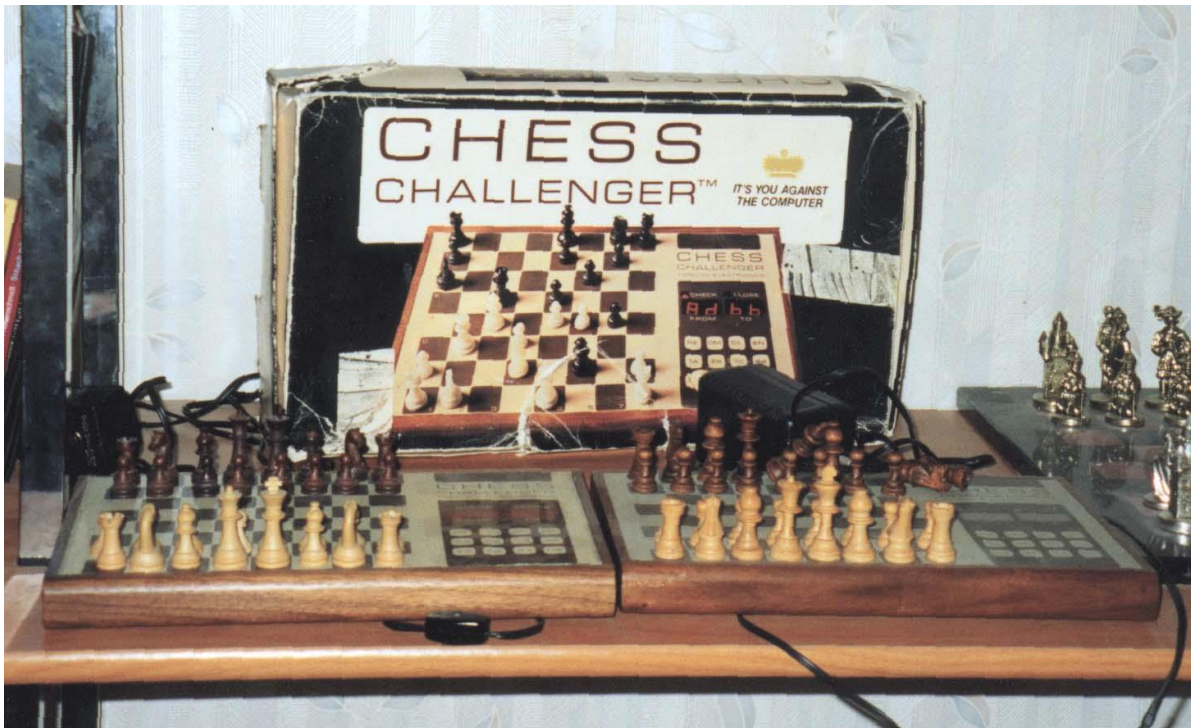
The Amsterdam module is the first world championship program (1985) of the English programmer Richard Lang. In 1986 the colleague replaced the module-set of his computer by the newer and stronger Dallas program of the same programmer. He thought that by playing often against this computer he would start playing better. When he did not succeed in that, he sold me the machine for 750 euro. However, in those days that was still quite a large sum for me to pay for a chess computer. Later-on I put the original Amsterdam module-set back in.

I would have liked to buy more chess computers at the time, but the real good machines were just too expensive for me. Up into the early nineties I bought several other chess computers and modules like the Mephisto Modular MM V with the opening module HG 550, the Mephisto Polgar module, the CXG Sphinx Dominator and the Fidelity Kishon Chesster.

In the eighties there were a few specialized computer chess stores in Vienna. Nowadays there is only the Schach Mattes Company.

When did you decide to start collecting chess computers and how did that come about?

The transition from computer chess player to computer collector just happened. In 1997 I could use the internet at my workplace. There I discovered the forum of the Gambitsoft Company and that way I met many other chess friends. In addition, I visited the websites of the E-Bay-auction and the German chess wholesale dealer Schach Niggemann, which offered used chess computers against a very favourable price. Magnificent antique chess computers in very good state were put up for sale at bargain prices because many people wanted to finance their new pc with them. That is very different from the large amounts you nowadays must pay at EBay for a chess computer with for instance a beautiful wooden read contact-board.



Everyone knows that the world's first commercial chess computer is a valuable collector's item. To come in possession of the first Fidelity Chess Challenger is certainly very difficult, but Kurt has got one!

I noticed that you have the very first Chess Challenger from the beginning of 1977 in your collection. How did you obtain this chess computer, which is also very special because of the switched board-coordinates?

I got the Chess Challenger 1 in the year 2001 from a German computer chess friend, Wolfgang Rausch, with whom I already had exchanged many old chess computers. But I don't think the first Chess Challenger is that rare. I know many collectors that have one. As far as I know there exist machines that are much rarer.

You have a great number of antique chess computers in your collection that are characterized by the beautiful large wooden boards with elegant chess pieces, equipped with read-contacts with or without the possibility of changing the chess-module. I noticed for instance the Sargon 2.5 ARB (automatic response board) from 1980, the Mephisto ESB (Electronical Schachbrett) II from 1981, the Fidelity Prestige from 1982, the Fidelity Elite Avantgarde version 10 from 1990, the Saitek Renaissance Sparc from 1992 or the Tasc R40 from 1993. I suppose it isn't easy to obtain these showpieces among the chess computers. How did you get these machines?

At the time I also thought it would be very difficult to get hold of the more expensive old machines. Fortunately, I started collecting chess computers exactly at the right time. I was able to purchase the very beautifully made Tasc R40 cheaply at EBay in the year 2000. The price I paid for it then was just a fraction of what you would have to pay for it now. To give you another example: "A few years ago I paid only 450 euro for a Mephisto Bavaria with the Genius 68030 module-set and the man who sold it to me was very pleased that he could still get that much money for it."

Many people thought that chess computers like old pc's would no longer have any value. I was very surprised that people disposed of their old machines so cheaply, while as a young chap I had been very keen on having these machines but could not afford them. As a result, I bought one chess computer after another and quickly broadened my collection.

Partly because of the contacts I had built up through my website, I was able to obtain beautiful classical chess computers. This way I bought a Fidelity Prestige and a chess robot, the Fidelity Chesster Phantom Eyeball, from a New York collector.



Yes, that's how Kurt had exhibited his chess computers. Ready to compete!

Chess robots are also part of your collection. You have for instance the Milton Bradley, the Fidelity Phantom, the Fidelity Phantom Chesster, the Fidelity Chesster Phantom Eyeball, the Mephisto Phantom and the Excalibur Mirage. The most remarkable thing about these robots is their ability to move chess pieces by means of so called special magnetic tapes and motors located underneath the chess board. Kurt, can you tell me a little more about these robots?

Chess robots fascinate me highly and did get a special place in my collection. I will give you a listing of my robots and a short description of the differences and similarities between these machines.

Milton Bradley (1983) - This chess robot, also known as the father of the Phantoms, came from the Milton Bradley Company (USA). Because of its complicated construction this machine was technically speaking a spectacular sight at the time, but this also made the machine more susceptible to failures. The Milton was obtainable in two models; one is named Milton and was intended for the European market and the other Grandmaster, attuned to the USA. Other than its successors this machine does not have a display to read the moves from and has a weaker program (Intelligent Software, London).



Kurt's Milton Bradley was fitted with a sturdy wooden casing.

Fidelity Phantom (1988) – This is the first chess robot brought on the market by the Fidelity Company in Miami (USA) and, other than the Milton Bradley does have a display. The program can be found in many other chess computers, like the Fidelity Par Excellence, the Elite Avant Garde 2100, the Kishon Chesster, the Peri Epsilon, etc.

Fidelity Phantom Chesster (1991) – When this Phantom Chesster came on the market, Fidelity had already been taken over by the Hegener & Glaser (Mephisto) company from Munich while only the old brand name was being continued for this robot. On the outside the machine is no different from an ordinary Fidelity Phantom; only this Fidelity robot is equipped with a voice.

Fidelity Chesster Phantom Eyeball (1991) – This is one of the rarest and most fascinating robots. Like the Fidelity Phantom Chesster it has a voice, but the voice is being activated by a movement-detector built into the front of the machine! The minute you stand in front of it, it will start to talk to you. The Phantom Eyeball then lets you know that it would like to play chess with you and subsequently tells you which button you need to press for that.

Mephisto Phantom (1991) – This robot is entirely identical to the classical version of the Fidelity Phantom but was launched for the European market by the German Hegener & Glaser (Mephisto) company. It has the new Mephisto inscription, but on the bottom of the machine you can still see that it originally was a Fidelity-machine. All Phantom-robots have a program from Kathe and Dan Spracklen.

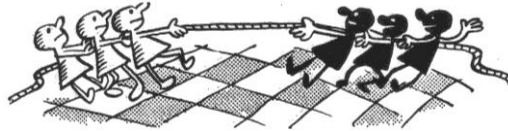
Excalibur Mirage (1997) – The Excalibur Electronics Company, founded in 1993 by Shane Samole, son of Fidelity-founder Sid, brought in 1997 the chess robot Mirage on the market, which on the outside doesn't look very much like the old Phantoms, but on the inside does have the same technique. Unfortunately, this machine is even more susceptible to trouble than its predecessors and because of that is no longer on the market. There are still some specialized stores that have a single specimen for sale. The program is from Ron Nelson and I expect that in the future this machine will also become a collector's item.



Kurt Kispert with his Fidelity Elite Avant Garde #10 against Rob's Mephisto Berlin Pro 68020. After three games the score was still in balance...

But there were also robots that could independently move the pieces with a grasping arm. For instance, the Boris Handroid from 1980 or de Novag Robot Adversary from 1982. Why don't I find these machines in your collection?

I know that from the Boris Handroid a few prototypes were made in 1980 and that it was never put upon the market. My Swiss chess friend, Rolf Bühler, informed me last year through the internet that he has one in his possession. At first, I would not believe that, but had to when he proved it by sending me pictures of his robot. According to Rolf there should be at least one other Handroid, the whereabouts of which is unknown, however.



The Novag Robot Adversary was taken into production in 1982 and put on the market. This robot is a real collector's item and there are only a few pieces left that are in good working condition. Even if you find someone who is willing to sell it, you will have to cough up a substantial amount of money. Nevertheless, it is impossible to have each rare machine in your collection. You would have to be quite rich to be able to buy them. But I am interested in knowing which other collectors also own special chess computers.



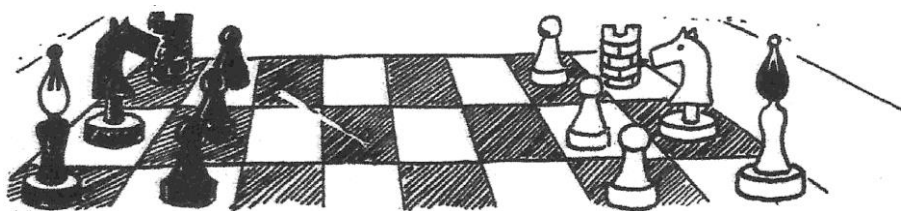
**Not every collector has a separate room to display his chess computers.
Fortunately, Kurt did have that luxury!**

How many chess computers do you have now?

I own almost 100 chess computers, but there are collectors who have many more. In the first place I would like to mention Hans-Peter Ketterling from Berlin, who claims to have over 500 and Karsten Bauermeister from Münster who has over 400 pieces.

What is your most favourite chess computer and why?

A difficult question! I very much like the Novag Super Expert C with a program from Dave Kittinger because it does not play as strongly as for instance the Tasc R40 or the Mephisto Bavaria with the Genius 68030 module. Moreover, I find the design of the machine very beautiful. Since I am an Austrian, the chess computer Peri Epsilon also has a special place among my favourite machines. Because this computer was produced in 1990 by the Austrian company Peri Spiele and in my opinion has a unique design. Looking at the small machines I find the CXG Sphinx Dominator very special because of its particular manner of playing which over the years gave me a lot of fun.



Do you ever test your chess computers by having them play against each other?

I would like to let my chess computers play against each other, but I don't have the time. I would like to draw up a personal ranking list of my chess computers. I want to let them play against each other with a clock time of 30 seconds per move. In my opinion no one plays at a slow tournament level against a chess computer and I am curious how my ranking list will look using the clock time I mentioned. All the same I believe that in the end there will not be much difference with the Swedish SSDF list.

Are you planning on expanding your collection any further?

Since my 50est machine I have been saying that I am only going to expand my collection in a qualitative way. Yet whenever I think of selling some of my lesser quality computers, I can't bring myself to part with them. Fortunately, my girlfriend is very positive about my hobby

Isn't it a very expensive hobby to buy so many exclusive chess computers?

It depends on how you look at it, but I don't think it is an expensive hobby. Because I was able to obtain a lot of machines at a low price a couple of years ago, the whole collection did not cost me that much in the end. If I were to spread all the money I spent on them over a period of six years, it would amount to between 200 and 250 euro per month. Besides I can afford it to drive a landrover for which I only paid 7000 euro. I know of people that spend much more money on their car, but are just as stuck in traffic as I am. Looking at it in that light I actually think that my collection cost me next to nothing...!



**Kurt in his element with the Fidelity Elite Avant Garde #10 with a 68040 CPU.
When it was introduced in 1990, such a machine cost DM 18,000 in Germany!**

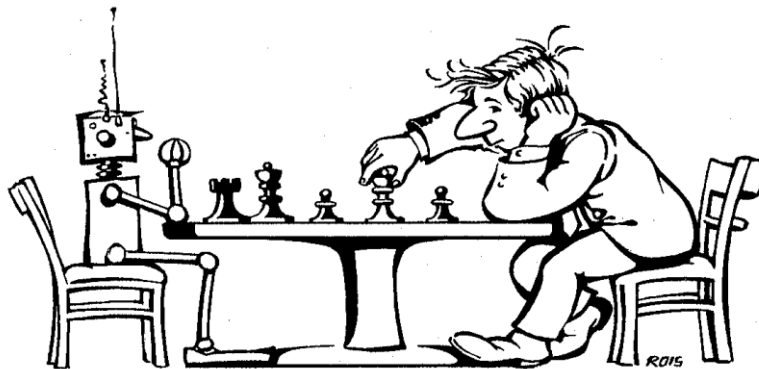
If a computer gets out of order, where do you have it repaired?

As a collector you naturally must know who you can turn to with a defective chess computer. Fortunately, a friend of mine is electrician and can remedy small defects on my chess computers. Also, I know mister Bucke in Munich (Germany), who only repairs Fidelity-machines. If they can't help me, I can always go to the German companies Niggemann, Elektroschach and Saitek. Luckily, up till now that has not been necessary very often.

As you well know, the PC-chess program has largely taken up the place of the chess computer. What do you think of this and do you have chess programs yourself?

I have certainly not lost sight of the modern time. In the nineties I bought almost all well-known chess programs and couldn't wait for a new program to come out. However, since the year 2000 I lost more and more interest. There were a great many programs available, the pc hardware changed quickly, and updates of chess programs succeeded each other rapidly. Nowadays I only buy a new program when I really find it interesting.

I used to buy a new pc almost every year, but right now I still have a Pentium 700 MHz at home and am very happy with it. Instead of buying a faster pc, I rather get an old chess computer. The programs I have on my pc now are already too strong for me anyway. I think it is much more elegant to sit behind a beautiful wooden board of a chess computer, drink a cup of coffee and play against a computer opponent that can be defeated.



Kurt, you do have a wonderful, unique website, well-organized, with a lot of information on chess computers. A site where also a lot of pictures and links to other computer chess websites can be found. In addition, there is a sell-buy forum on the site and a question and answer forum for everyone who wants information in this field. When did you decide to build a website and why did you do so?

That is an interesting story. I had no desire to have my own website, but some four years ago my friend Margit wanted her own site. Since I am the computer expert in the house, I was given the task to build the site and organize it further. I always thought it would be very difficult to make a homepage, but with programs like FrontPage 2000 it has become of childlike simplicity. Once I really had come to like it, I started to create a site for myself, which I have gradually expanded more and more in the past few years. I called my site Kurt's Schachcomputer Homepage and I regularly receive positive reactions from the many visitors from all corners of the world.

Do you have plans for your website?

I do have a great many plans with my website, but I often lack the time to realize them. I did not foresee that my website would be visited by so many chess friends and the many positive reactions I get from them. If you only knew how many e-mails I receive daily.

Today there is still a lot of interest in old chess computers and luckily there is also quite a bit of information available on the subject. In this field I will be able to expand my website further. I have already put the most important information about the Fidelity and Mephisto computers on my site, but I still would like to inform more about the other brands. And the presentation of my home page can also do with some changes. So there is enough work to do, you might actually say that it is never finished.

In 2001 the 1st D.A.CH. Oldie-Computer-Tournament was played in Kaufbeuren Germany. The letters D.A.CH. stand for the German, Austrian and Swiss participants. Meanwhile the 3rd D.A.CH tournament, that took place on 25 and 26 October, is already over. You did have a large part in the organisation. Can you tell me a little more about that?

When you informed me about the 1st CSVN Gebruikers tournament in Leiden, I would have liked to immediately drive over there with three chess computers. Unfortunately, the large distance between Vienna and Leiden kept me from doing so. Yet I believed that it should be possible to also organize a similar tournament through my website and the many contacts with chess computer lovers. That is what I proposed to my (internet) chess friends. The tournament should be easy to reach for all interested persons from German language countries. Eventually we picked the South-German city Kaufbeuren.

The organisation of our tournament is not so difficult anymore because I found the ideal tournament leader in my Austrian chess friend Franz Wiesenecker. He makes sure that all kinds of matters concerning the tournament work perfectly. The German collector Alwin Gruber takes care of the hotel and the overnight stays of the operators in Kaufbeuren. It is my task to give as much publicity as possible to this tournament through my website and internet forum. I hope that this way even more participants and their old machines will apply for the 4th D.A.CH. tournament which will probably take place in October 2004.



Kurt Kispert (left) and next to him his interviewer Rob van Son from Amsterdam.

In the Netherlands we have the Gebruikers tournament and in Germany the DACH tournament. Is it possible for the chess computer lovers in England to organise a similar tournament?

I think you must find someone in England who has the willingness and the time to build a chess computer website, like mine. With a good forum the English chess computer lover can then meet each other, and this way organize a central location where they can travel to with their chess computers to play their oldies tournament. Should anyone be interested, I will be more than willing to provide the necessary help in the form of information and picture material.

Do you believe the chess computer still has a future?

I believe there won't be much change in the next few years. Since about ten years the chess computer already has no longer a real future. Yet there are still many idealists who believe it is better to play against an equal opponent than against a big bruiser with an elo of 2700, equipped with a screen and a mouse. Personally, I believe that the chess computer is winning background because via the internet it is increasingly easy for many chess computer lovers to come into contact with each other and exchange their experiences that way.

Kurt, thank you for this interview. We talked about your wonderful website. Would you like to tell the readers in the UK how they can visit this site?

You are welcome; it was a pleasure to be able to answer your questions. My website can be reached at the following address: <http://www.schachcomputer.at>.

I would like to take the opportunity to send my English, German and Dutch computer chess friends the kindest regards from Vienna and I hope they will visit my website sometime soon.

Author: Rob van Son, October 2003

For your information: The Dutch version of this interview by Rob van Son appeared in Computerschaak no. 1, February 2003 and the English version in Selective Search no. 109, December 2003/January 2004.



Kurt Kispert
geboren am 25. November 1959 in Wien
gestorben am 14. August 2020 in Wien

<https://bestattung-himmelblau.gemeinsam-trauern.net/begleiten/kurt-kispert>

Kurt Kispert
born on 25 November 1959 in Vienna
†
died on 14 August 2020 in Vienna



Since 2001, Kurt was the organizer of the D.A.CH-Oldie-Tournaments in Kaufbeuren, laying the basis for the annual meetings in our chess computer scene. Furthermore, since 1997 many people who share our common hobby have visited his lovingly designed homepage: <http://www.schachcomputer.at/>.