

The ChessBaron Guide to Buying a Chess Computer

Introduction

This is intended as a guide on how to buy the right chess computer. The choice is between low priced hand held models in plastic through to high priced chess computers made for the desktop that are serious challenges to over 95% of chess players worldwide. This guide covers model types, price, strength levels, materials used and manufacturers, including a special section on the Novag Citrine.

1. Model Types

Available chess computers are handhelds and desktops with the occasional model that serves in both categories (just one as of 2011). Desktops are not considered portable other than being transferred from one surface to another. Handhelds are designed to be carried in a jacket pocket or a back sack for use in a car, train, plane or in a doctors waiting room, etc. The hand held types are considered robust and reliable. The desktop ones have the most hazardous part of their life in getting to the consumer, whereupon they generally perform well for a long period of time.

An example of a desktop: <http://www.chessbaron.co.uk/chess-CMD2004.htm>

An example of a hand held: <http://www.chessbaron.co.uk/chess-CM2006.htm>

2. Price

Price is obviously a factor in choosing a chess computer. A good handheld chess computer will cost from £20 to around £70, but there are not many types available.

A good desktop chess computer will cost from £70, to around £400. There are several types available.

The decision on price will be made with the types of material used in the manufacture borne in mind. This section follows later in this e-book.

3. Strength Levels

Even the more basic chess computers can, at their highest levels, beat most chess players. Their algorithms have been used across a range of computers that a manufacturer has. Often the expensive models have the same program as the cheaper models, although there are other differences in strength that are tweaked for higher prices models, which is understandable.

All chess computers have strength settings that can be set for an appropriate game with their human opponent. The general idea in using computers is to set the machine at a realistic level – learn to beat it, then set it a little higher, and so on.

So it can be said that there is no such thing as a chess computer that is too strong for a purchase – they can all be set down to lower levels for appropriate play.

4. Materials Used

Cheaper chess computers are made from plastic, including the pieces. These have a cheap feeling but afford a good game for a low price. When we consider the complex algorithms involved in a chess engine, most of the cost of the unit goes into the chess engine software at the forefront of computing capability – the casing and pieces are generally made in China for low prices.

More expensive chess computers recognise the demand of consumers for genuine wood cabinetry. One of the most popular models is the Novag Carnelian, which has a synthetic cabinet (plastic, but looks like wood from a distance), but the pieces are made from genuine sheesham wood. The same is true of the higher priced Novag Obsidian, although the plastic case is maintained. Please see our candid notes on the merits of the chess computer manufacturers below.

Here's the Novag Carnelian: <http://www.chessbaron.co.uk/chess-CMD2004.htm>

Here's the Novag Obsidian: <http://www.chessbaron.co.uk/chess-CMD2009.htm>

5. Manufacturers

As of 2011 Chess computer manufacturers appear to be caught between software excellence and a disregard or lack of awareness for the packaging quality demands of the 21st Century. The software is generally world class, but the quality of the units themselves are not up to modern demands.

Siatek make durable chess computers that perform well – but everything is plastic. They don't seem to recognise that people want machines that feel good and have some quality to them. So they make weightless plastic pieces that belie the software beneath, giving the product a cheap flimsy appearance. People prefer wood products, not plastic. But a better quality approach to plastic may be substantially better.

Novag are an atrocious company in almost every way, acting with disregard for the demands of consumers, distributors and retailers. The company has been passed from it's original holders to another company and it's ethos is all but lost. It's supply, especially to the UK market is sporadic. It is lucky indeed that it's main computer is the only one in it's market and so enjoys a demand that it surely puzzles over. As soon as any competing product arises – it will probably lose market share rapidly. They ship sporadically, they cannot be contacted, they deal outrageously with their distributors and much more.

Their survival is down to the fact that three of their products are actually fairly good and are thus in some demand.

1. The Novag Carnelian: A product that has a faux wood cabinet with real wood pieces. It's an inexpensive product and so has some degree of mass appeal.
2. The Novag Obsidian: A strong chess computer that has real wood pieces.
3. The Novag Citrine: A strong chess computer that has real wood cabinetry and real wood pieces. It's also auto sensory (no need to press down on the surface to indicate a move, it's tracked by reed switches).

If Novag's approach to business partners and consumers matched it's product – it would be a good company and would continue to innovate. The product is far from

perfect, but it has no competition, and so, no pressing need to address the issues it has. It's unlikely that we'll see any change in the company.

Here is the Novag Citrine Enhanced Version

<http://www.chessbaron.co.uk/chess-CMD2014.htm>

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