

# Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine

## A New Spin on Moral Ambiguity in the Dot-Com Era

By Tim Ventura, February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2006

*In 1997 Russian Grand-Master Garry Kasparov played IBM's Deep Blue in the "chess match of the century" – and lost! While Deep Blue's victory was initially heralded as a breakthrough success in technology innovation, a new documentary offers a startling twist: that IBM may have rigged the match to score public-relations points in the stock market, and broken Kasparov's will in the process...*

I just finished watching "**Game Over: Kasparov and the Machine**". For a while now, I've been wanting to write a comprehensive article on the broad implications of [Ray Kurzweil's](#) IT-futurism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I'd hoped that this movie would be a great introduction to the increasing proficiency of computer-technology in a number of once human-dominated roles.

Interestingly, this documentary was not what I expected: it very clearly suggested that IBM had rigged the 1997 world-championship chess game between the Deep Blue supercomputer and grand-master chess-player [Garry Kasparov](#). The claim was that through a man-machine interface kept out of sight during the game, the IBM team been able to effectively leverage human processing in conjunction with the machine's ability to make better moves than Kasparov could in an unaided capacity. In other words, cheating -- as Kasparov had not only designed his strategy based on the rigid rule-sets he'd encountered playing Deep Blue back in 1996, but also because he'd easily won the earlier match, giving the Deep Blue team less than a year for an upgrade and a rematch.



**Game of the Century:** In 1997 Garry Kasparov defended the human chess title against a machine.

The compelling but circumstantial evidence raises more questions than answers: the Deep Blue team looks & acts guilty all the way through the documentary, and IBM also refused to deliver the log-files on the computer's game after the 6 matches, despite the fact that they'd promised this as a condition to finish the game. Additionally, IBM reportedly suppressed news stories by chess-reporters suggesting that the computer's game looked suspicious, including locking one reporter in a basement room to interrogate him about what he'd written.



**1997 Rematch:** IBM invested a lot in promoting the 1997 rematch.

Like everybody else, at that time of the event I'd assumed that the computer had finally just been improved to the point of being able to beat Kasparov at chess, but now I wonder. There's been a lot of social-mileage in between then and now -- and IBM had a clear motive to win at any cost: a 15% increase in their stock-price by beating the world-championship titleholder. We've gone through scandals at Enron, Boeing, MCI-Worldcom, and a number of other companies since '97 in which corporate ethics were sacrificed in the name of boosting stock prices.

How could IBM cheat and win? This is a slippery slope that leads to a lot of difficult questions. Kasparov suggested that the easiest method would have been to literally station a man in a locked room with an over-ride button to force the computer to reselect every time it made a bad move. Certainly it made enough of them in the first match -- Kasparov was convinced in the first game that the machine was only marginally improved from the 1996 programming. However, in match #2 it exhibited very human strategies, which seemed to appear out of nowhere. Was there man behind the curtain with a guaranteed failsafe? We may never know...



**Garry Kasparov:** In a moment of concentration during the match.

The other possibility that's been suggested is that IBM uploaded every strategy that Kasparov had ever played, meaning that the machine wasn't playing chess based on strategy, but was instead mimicking Kasparov in the same way a parrot seems to talk -- a move designed with both strategic & psychological defeat as a path to victory. Is it truly cheating, though, when you take into consideration the fact that chess-masters nearly always use psychology, deception, and unpredictability to outwit their opponents?

Why would IBM risk committing fraud when they stood to profit from exposure no matter what the outcome of the game was? The answer is quite simple: during the dot-com boom, people looked the other way. The best known example of this was Lucent researcher Jan Hendrick Schon, who repeatedly altered data and falsified claims that Lucent had produced a workable molecular scale transistor. I saw examples of similar behavior in several dot-com era IT companies, who regarded it not as a lie, but instead as almost taking out a loan on future progress. They believed that they'd get there eventually, and they'd just fake it until the reality caught up with the lies they were telling. Sometimes the strategy worked, but in other cases it drove the company out of business.

One of my close acquaintances was an employee-victim of a fraud scandal involving payroll-theft and financial misappropriations in 2001 involving a now-defunct IT company here in Redmond. While the names remain anonymous, what struck me was my former colleague's discussion about a post-closure meeting that he attended as a part of class-action litigation process to get the back-pay delivered, *"sitting in the law-office and looking across the table at this individual, I began to realize how ruthlessly calculating his deception had been. I was struck by a sense of evil just emanating from this person, and suddenly the prospect of getting months of back-pay through our lawsuit took a distant back-seat to the urge to simply flee from the room this person was in -- to get away from him, for the most primitive of reasons. As the court proceeded to dig through his background in preparation for the case, we found example after example of corruption, and*



**Rise of the Machines:** Game Over portrays Deep Blue much like Hal: not to be trusted.

*reported claims of child-molestation that he'd always managed to pay off before trial. This was not a man, but a monster living in a man's body."*

Corruption may start at the top, but it obeys the principles of Reaganomics to rapidly trickle down to the rest of the corporate entity. The "look the other way" mentality appears to easily transmit down the chain of command, but eventually engenders a disrespect for the company, customers, and coworkers at every level of the organization. Moral principles, once compromised, become easy to twist further to serve one's needs.



**AT&T Employee Theft:** Chairs, phones – is theft ever justifiable as 'corporate payback'?

During the AT&T Fixed Wireless layoffs in 2002, I saw example after example of average, hard-working employees giving the company "a little payback" by stealing corporate equipment before they finally left the office. As I consistently worked

late on my part of the project, I was interrupted many times at my cubicle by security-guards asking about shadowy figures hauling off laptops, servers, and all sorts of office-equipment. They began a lockdown process that shut-off badge access for most employees after hours, making employees demonstrate a real need to be in the office at night for a given project. Initially, returning used equipment had started with an honor system to return the equipment as it became no longer necessary in our company systems, but we found that lots of senior team-members with decades of experience in IT had been engaging in petty theft -- hauling off \$60,000 Sparc Workstations that they claimed "the company owed them for damaging their careers". Maybe the company agreed, or maybe it was just too busy getting ready to shut down, because nobody ever pursued the issue with them, even though most of us knew the offenders.

The last example of this that I personally witnessed wasn't in 2002, but instead in late 2004 -- when I visited a former coworker's home to chat with him about job opportunities. Two full years after the company had closed, I found him sitting on a \$2,500 ergonomic chair, and using a \$600 Lucent speakerphone, both of which he readily admitted had come from AT&T. Those items hadn't even come from his own office -- he'd raided them from conference rooms that were mothballed for months with little security. He'd even joked about staking out the camera system at night to ensure that he could roll the bulky chair down a set of stairs and out a service-door that nobody had bothered to put a camera on because of its limited accessibility.

What does this have to do with Kasparov and new technology? Well, in a world that values new



**AT&T Servers:** At 8-feet tall, it's hard to lose these, but AT&T lost a few near the end.

ideas based on their potential profitability, it seems that fraud of all kinds was perpetrated in that era, giving me no reason to doubt that the IBM team would have had a motive to cheat in order to boost the bottom line. On the other hand, Kasparov has ample motive to decry the IBM win in 1997-- after all, it shook his confidence enough to send his unbroken winning-streak into a downward spiral of defeat that's cost him everything in the years since that first loss. Like IBM, Kasparov also has a motive -- but in his case the motive is to question every aspect of the IBM system that he'd previously taken for granted during his easy 1996 win.

