

FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL

Reading Challenge

Kasparov vs Deep Blue

The day a machine outsmarted the greatest chess player in history.

Level: B1

Skill: Reading

Duration: ~20 min

Age: Teens (11-16)

Topic: True Stories

Event: May 1997

The Article

On 11 May 1997, in a heavily guarded room on the 35th floor of a skyscraper in New York City, a man sat down at a chess board, made fourteen moves, stared at the position for exactly one minute, and then did something he had almost never done in his entire career: he **resigned**. The man was Garry Kasparov — the reigning World Chess Champion, widely considered the greatest chess player who had ever lived. His opponent was not a person. It was a machine: a 1.4-tonne IBM supercomputer called Deep Blue, containing 480 specialised chess **processors** and capable of **evaluating** 200 million chess positions per second. When Kasparov stood up from the table and walked away, he did not just lose a chess game. He lost a battle that the entire human race was watching — the battle between human intelligence and **artificial intelligence**.

The Greatest Player

To understand why this mattered, you need to understand who Garry Kasparov was. Born in Baku, Azerbaijan (then part of the Soviet Union) in 1963, Kasparov became the youngest undisputed World Chess Champion in history at the age of 22. He held the title for fifteen years. His chess rating — a number that measures a player's strength — was the highest ever recorded. He was not just good at chess. He was so far ahead of every other human player that challenging him seemed almost pointless. His playing style combined extraordinary **calculation** ability with deep **intuition** — the mysterious, almost artistic capacity to "feel" which move was right, even when the mathematics was too complex to work out fully. He played chess the way a great musician plays an instrument: technically perfect, but with something beyond technique — something human.

Kasparov was also supremely confident. Some called it arrogance. He called it accuracy. "I am the best chess player in the world," he said in interviews, without irony or false modesty. "I have proved it over fifteen years. No human being alive can beat me in a match." The key word, it turned out, was "human."

The Machine

IBM had been building chess-playing computers since the 1980s. The project was not really about chess — it was about demonstrating the power of IBM's computing technology. Chess was chosen because it was the ultimate test of logical thinking: a game with more possible positions than there are atoms in the observable universe, requiring both **calculation** and **strategy**, both short-term tactics and long-term planning. If a computer could beat the best human at chess, it would prove that machines could outperform human brains at their most sophisticated task.

Deep Blue was not one computer — it was a system of specialised **processors** designed exclusively for chess. While Kasparov could **evaluate** approximately three positions per second — relying on pattern recognition, experience, and **intuition** to eliminate bad options instantly — Deep Blue could evaluate two hundred million. It did not "understand" chess in

any meaningful sense. It did not have favourite openings or emotional reactions to beautiful moves. It simply calculated every possible sequence of moves to a depth of twelve or more moves ahead, assigned a numerical score to each resulting position, and chose the move with the highest score. It was brute force applied to a game of elegance. And it was getting better every year.

The First Match: 1996

Kasparov and Deep Blue first met in Philadelphia in February 1996. It was a six-game match, and the world watched with a mixture of fascination and anxiety. In Game 1, Deep Blue did something nobody expected: it won. It was the first time a reigning World Champion had ever lost a game to a computer under standard tournament conditions. The result made headlines worldwide. But Kasparov was not finished. He studied Deep Blue's playing style between games — identifying patterns in its approach, finding weaknesses in its **evaluate** function, and exploiting positions where brute calculation was less effective than human **intuition**. He won three of the remaining five games and drew two. Final score: Kasparov 4, Deep Blue 2. Humanity had won. But the margin was uncomfortably thin.

The Rematch: 1997

IBM spent the next year upgrading Deep Blue. The **rematch** took place in May 1997 at the Equitable Center in midtown Manhattan, with the eyes of the world upon it. The prize was \$1.1 million. The real stakes were higher: the answer to a question that had fascinated philosophers for centuries — can a machine think?

Kasparov won Game 1 convincingly. His confidence was evident. "The machine is strong," he told journalists, "but it does not understand chess. It calculates. Understanding and calculating are not the same thing." Then came Game 2 — the game that changed everything.

The Move That Shook the World

In Game 2, Deep Blue played a move — specifically, move 36 — that Kasparov found deeply unsettling. It was a quiet, positional move — not a dramatic sacrifice or a forced sequence, but a subtle repositioning of a piece that seemed to show long-term **strategy** rather than brute calculation. It was, in Kasparov's word, "a human move." It suggested that Deep Blue was not just calculating — it was planning. It was, perhaps, thinking.

Kasparov was rattled. He **resigned** the game in a position that, analysts later discovered, he could actually have fought on from. It was a **blunder** — not a chess blunder but a **psychological** one. The machine had got inside his head. From that point on, Kasparov was not playing against a computer. He was playing against his own fear of the computer.

Games 3, 4, and 5 were drawn. The match was tied 2.5-2.5 going into the final game. Everything depended on Game 6. Kasparov, visibly stressed and sleeping badly, chose an aggressive opening — and then made a catastrophic error on move seven. It was, by the standards of a World Champion, an almost incomprehensible mistake — a **blunder** that even

club-level players would have avoided. Deep Blue ruthlessly exploited it. Kasparov **resigned** after just nineteen moves. The match was over. Deep Blue had won 3.5 to 2.5. A machine had defeated the greatest chess player in history.

The Accusation

Kasparov did not take the loss gracefully. In the press conference afterwards — one of the most dramatic in sporting history — he accused IBM of cheating. Specifically, he claimed that human **grandmasters** had intervened during the games, helping Deep Blue make decisions that the computer could not have reached on its own. He pointed to the mysterious move in Game 2 as evidence — a move, he argued, that showed human **intuition**, not machine calculation. He demanded the computer's logs — the complete record of every calculation Deep Blue had made during the match. IBM refused. The **controversy** has never been fully resolved.

Years later, one of Deep Blue's programmers revealed that the famous move in Game 2 was actually the result of a software bug — the computer, unable to choose between several equally rated moves, had selected one randomly. The move that Kasparov interpreted as evidence of machine intelligence was, in fact, evidence of machine confusion. It was a glitch. And a glitch had broken the greatest chess player in the world.

What It Meant

The immediate reaction was dramatic. Headlines around the world declared the end of human supremacy in intellectual competition. "THE BRAIN'S LAST STAND," wrote Newsweek. Some commentators treated it as a tragedy — the moment when machines surpassed their creators. Others saw it as a triumph of human engineering — after all, humans had built Deep Blue.

Kasparov himself, after his initial anger faded, offered the most nuanced view. "Deep Blue was intelligent the way an alarm clock is intelligent," he said in a later interview. "It did not know it was playing chess. It did not know it was winning. It did not feel joy or satisfaction or curiosity. It processed numbers. That is not thinking. That is counting very fast." He paused. "But counting very fast, it turns out, is enough to beat a **grandmaster**. And that is the interesting question: what does it mean when a machine can do something better than any human, without understanding what it is doing?"

The **legacy** of Kasparov vs Deep Blue extends far beyond chess. The match was the first high-profile demonstration that **artificial intelligence** could outperform human experts at complex intellectual tasks — a reality that has since expanded into medicine, law, finance, art, and dozens of other fields. It raised questions about the nature of intelligence that we are still debating today: Is calculation the same as thinking? Is speed the same as understanding? Can a machine be creative if it does not know what creativity is?

Today, the cheapest chess app on your phone plays better than Deep Blue ever did. The strongest chess programs in the world — Stockfish, AlphaZero — would destroy Deep Blue as easily as Deep Blue destroyed Kasparov. The machine revolution that seemed so shocking in

1997 has become so normal that we carry it in our pockets without thinking about it. But the question Kasparov asked — what does it mean when a machine can do something better than you, without understanding what it is doing? — has never been more relevant. And the answer, perhaps, is this: it means we need to understand ourselves better. Because the things that make us human — creativity, **intuition**, emotion, meaning — are the things no machine has ever replicated. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Vocabulary Cards

Comprehension Quiz

Key Vocabulary

Term	Definition
Grandmaster	The highest title a chess player can achieve, given to the world's best players
Processor	The part of a computer that performs calculations and runs programs
Calculate	To work out a number or answer using mathematics or logical thinking
Resign	To officially accept defeat in a chess game by stopping play
Rematch	A second game or contest between the same opponents
Strategy	A carefully planned approach to achieve a long-term goal
Intuition	The ability to understand something immediately without conscious reasoning
Artificial Intelligence	Computer systems designed to perform tasks that normally require human thinking
Evaluate	To judge or assess the quality, importance, or value of something
Psychological	Relating to the mind and how it affects behaviour and emotions
Blunder	A serious mistake, especially one caused by carelessness or poor judgement
Humiliation	The feeling of being deeply embarrassed or ashamed in public
Sabotage	To deliberately destroy or damage something to prevent it from working
Controversy	A public disagreement about something that people feel strongly about
Legacy	The lasting impact or influence that a person or event leaves behind

Comprehension Quiz

1. What happened in the first match between Kasparov and Deep Blue in 1996?

- A) Deep Blue won easily
- B) Kasparov lost the first game but won the match 4-2, becoming the first human to lose a game to a computer at championship level
- C) The match was cancelled
- D) It ended in a draw

2. Why was Game 2 of the 1997 rematch a turning point?

- A) Kasparov won brilliantly
- B) Deep Blue made a mysterious move that seemed almost human, causing Kasparov to resign — he later discovered the position was actually playable
- C) The computer crashed
- D) Kasparov refused to play

3. What did Kasparov accuse IBM of doing during the 1997 match?

- A) Paying the referee
- B) Using human chess players to secretly help Deep Blue make decisions
- C) Stealing his chess notes
- D) Changing the rules of chess

4. How many positions per second could Deep Blue evaluate?

- A) One thousand
- B) Two hundred million
- C) One million
- D) Ten billion

5. What is the main significance of the Kasparov vs Deep Blue story?

- A) It proved that chess is not an interesting game
- B) It was the first time a machine defeated a reigning world champion in a full match, raising profound questions about human intelligence vs artificial intelligence
- C) It made Kasparov the most famous chess player
- D) It proved computers are better than humans at everything

Answer Key

#	Ans	Question
1	B	What happened in the first match between Kasparov and Deep Blue in 1996?
2	B	Why was Game 2 of the 1997 rematch a turning point?
3	B	What did Kasparov accuse IBM of doing during the 1997 match?
4	B	How many positions per second could Deep Blue evaluate?
5	B	What is the main significance of the Kasparov vs Deep Blue story?

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