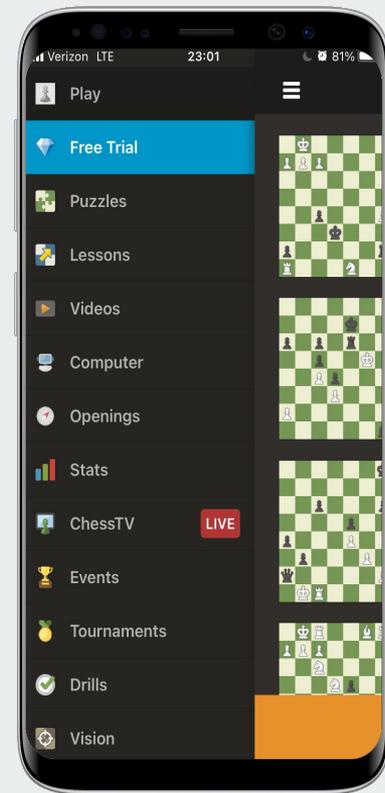




# Chess.com UX Rewrite

Prepared by Giorgi Plys-Garzotto





# Overview

During quarantine, my family has been doing weekly chess nights using **Chess.com's app**.

We're probably not alone, considering the **rise of online gaming** during the pandemic.

The thing is, Chess.com's app doesn't just confuse my parents--I've talked to people of all ages who find the Chess.com app **frustrating**.

By **reworking the "start game" flow**, I'll show how the app can serve longtime users better, and build a relationship with new users too!



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## The Flow Right Now

There two entry points to start a chess game: the home page and the menu.

This leads users to a choice about the mode of their game (computer or human opponent, for instance).

One more page of specs on time limit, bot difficulty, etc., and the game begins!

**From just this process, it's clear Chess.com can be frustrating.**

# First step: home page

Menu (far left)

User's current and most recent games on the home page



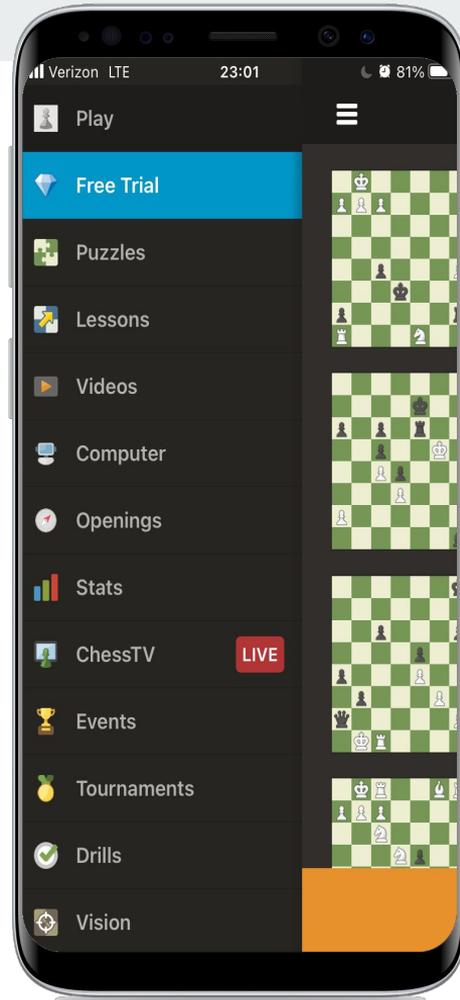
Messages (bell, center right), and updates on active games (chess piece, far-right).

“New game” CTA button is the most prominent feature

## Second step: pop-out menu

The “play” button is at the top, but the “free trial” button is highlighted

Long list of features, with Chess.com content highest and most social features listed lower down

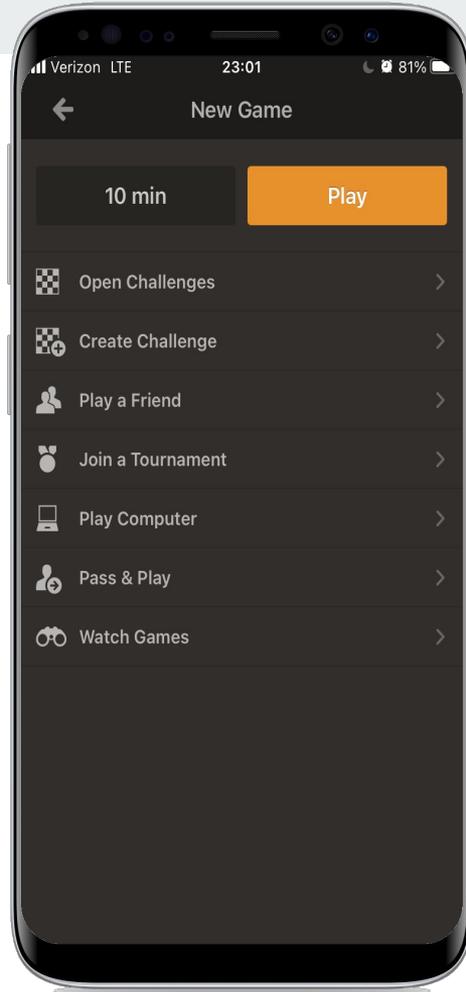


Tapping the background takes the user back to the home screen

The menu scrolls down, though there's no signposting to show that

# Third step: starting a game

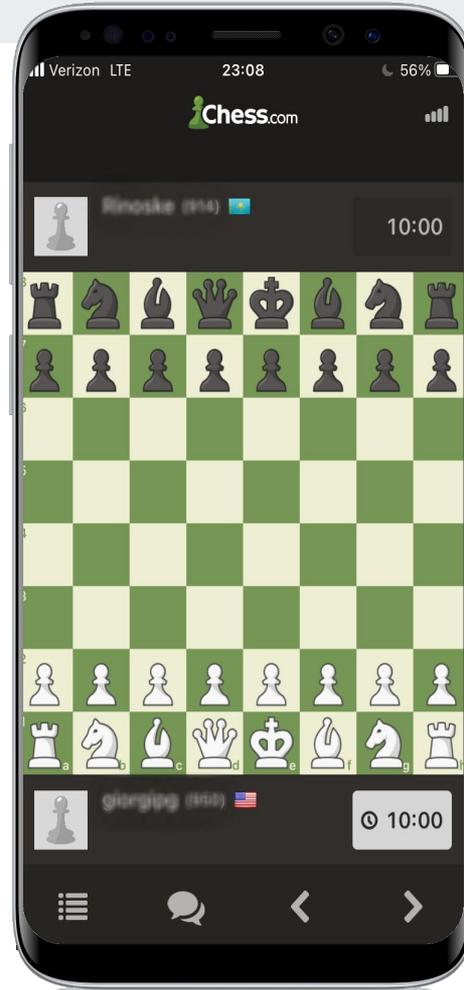
The time on the far left lets players choose a time limit for their games



The “play” button

Many different modes of play are listed, and these lead to their own settings

# Fourth step: playing a game



The chess game is the most prominent visual element

Menu (far left)  
In-game chat (center)

The timer shows how long a player has left

Arrows (right side) let a user switch between their active games



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# Research And Insights

## Using my network and some online research, I got my hands on some data!

An analysis of the app's current features gave me an idea of what problems Chess.com is trying to solve for its users right now.

Then, I was able to perform a quick usability test with a couple friends. I pulled social media posts and app store reviews to check their results against a wide range of opinions.

Together, that gives me a good idea of Chess.com's goals, and the unmet needs of its users!



# First: what is the app doing right?

Chess.com sells itself as an app where people don't just play chess, but also *learn* chess. That's why there are so many different features; it's all content that can help users strengthen their skills.

Chess.com is also a *social* chess app. It lets people add each other as friends, there are forums where users can meet each other, and there's even in-game instant messaging.

This makes Chess.com the perfect pandemic app! People in quarantine can use it to keep their minds active by getting better at chess, while also connecting with family and friends that they miss.



## Quick Stats:

Chess.com doesn't make its user data public, but [Similar Web](#) estimates 24% of Chess.com users are in the U.S., with 7% in India and 5% in the UK.

The app has over 100 million users, and its users are likely to be interested in topics like video games, news, social networks, and electronics. These interests map to 18-34 year olds, affluent people, college educated people, and more men than women.

Those demographics are more or less the traditional profile of a chess player--men over 25 with incomes around \$100,000. But not so fast!

In November 2020 (after *The Queen's Gambit* came out) Chess.com started getting over 100,000 new users a day! There are plenty of new pandemic-era users too. **These users are less likely to fit that profile.**



## My usability test showed pain points in all demos.

First I asked the participants (four people, three who play Chess.com and one who doesn't) to simply play a chess game in front of me, which went pretty well for most people.

But with the other tasks I asked for--starting a lesson and messaging a friend--only the participants who already did those things regularly found what they wanted quickly.

In *The Design of Everyday Things*, Don Norman points out that one hallmark of bad design is when users simply memorize set patterns of interaction to get what they need out of their technology. It seems like Chess.com is frustrating to use, so people figure out how to do what they want and just repeat those sequences.

This is totally opposite to the behavior Chess.com should be encouraging if they want their users to explore all those lessons, or make new friends on their app!



# User testimony expanded on the tests.

- **Tiny buttons!** Many features are crowded into a single menu, meaning people with large hands often click the wrong thing by accident.
- **Boomers/ Gen X'ers have trouble finding most functions.** The older test subjects were more frustrated by the app than the millennials.
- **Millennials do better, but still find higher-level stuff confusing.** There's *a lot* of functions, and with the cluttered screen it's hard to figure out where they are and what they do.
- **The site doesn't seem to plan for user mistakes.** One user hit the back button by accident and couldn't find her way back to the game. There were no signposts to follow!
- **You don't know what you don't know.** One more knowledgeable user pointed out features to me that I would never have known were there.



# Online reviews

- @joe\_ging on Twitter: “Too many features, clustered ugly design.”
- @ellevish on Twitter: “Use that Queen’s Gambit fueled revenue to hire a UX designer, y’all.”
- March 2021 Apple Store review: “Convolutated and difficult!”
- April 2020 Trustpilot review: “I’m only 3 hours into this website and I’ve spent every single second wading through clunky, over-complicated and constantly repeating pages.”
- December 2017 Apple Store review: “There are SO MANY sections that are not grouped up...instead, all the categories that should be located inside [drop-downs] are scattered.”



# What does this mean for design?

We might not be seeing the statistics available to Chess.com's UX team, but already we have a sense of what's lacking:

- **Low discoverability.** People can't find things on the app!
- **Unforgiving design.** When people mess up, they can't fix it.
- **Overwhelming choices.** There's clearly tons to do, but without discoverability, that doesn't necessarily empower people.

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# Personas

I put together some personas to reflect the growing and changing user base of Chess.com.

While some see *The Queen's Gambit's* effect as a flash in the pan, it represents what could be a long term trend.

Beth Harmon doesn't fit the typical chess player's profile, and the people inspired by her to play chess might not either.

While some versions of this story lead to users losing interest in time, more inclusive and clear design can keep them around for a more diverse Chess.com!

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# Persona #1

Jack fits the traditional profile of a chess player. He's probably the most likely to use all those lessons, and the least likely to use the app's social capabilities.



**Jack, 25**

Programmer in San Francisco

Jack has a tech job where intellect is valued, and that carries over to his personal life. He likes chess because getting better at it feels like an accomplishment, plus he gets bragging rights. He sometimes plays with friends, but is also happy playing with strangers.

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## Persona #2

Julia represents another segment of young people who like chess. She might divide her time between lessons and the social aspects of the app, or lean social.



**Julia, 30**

Journalist in Portland

Julia got introduced to chess through her larger love of board games. She likes strategy, and chess provides her friends a quieter evening than clubbing, without being as sedentary as just watching a movie. She's more likely to play with friends, but plays strangers on occasion.

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## Persona #3

Margie represents older people using Chess.com. Some designer might write them off, but older people have more time to chess lessons, and get more health benefits from learning new things!



**Margie, 55**  
Teacher in NYC

Margie has fun playing chess, and has used it in her lesson plans to help her students with math and science. Her kids play on Chess.com and want to use it for family game nights, both in person and remotely. Once she finds her way around the app, she enjoys showing her kids she's still got it.

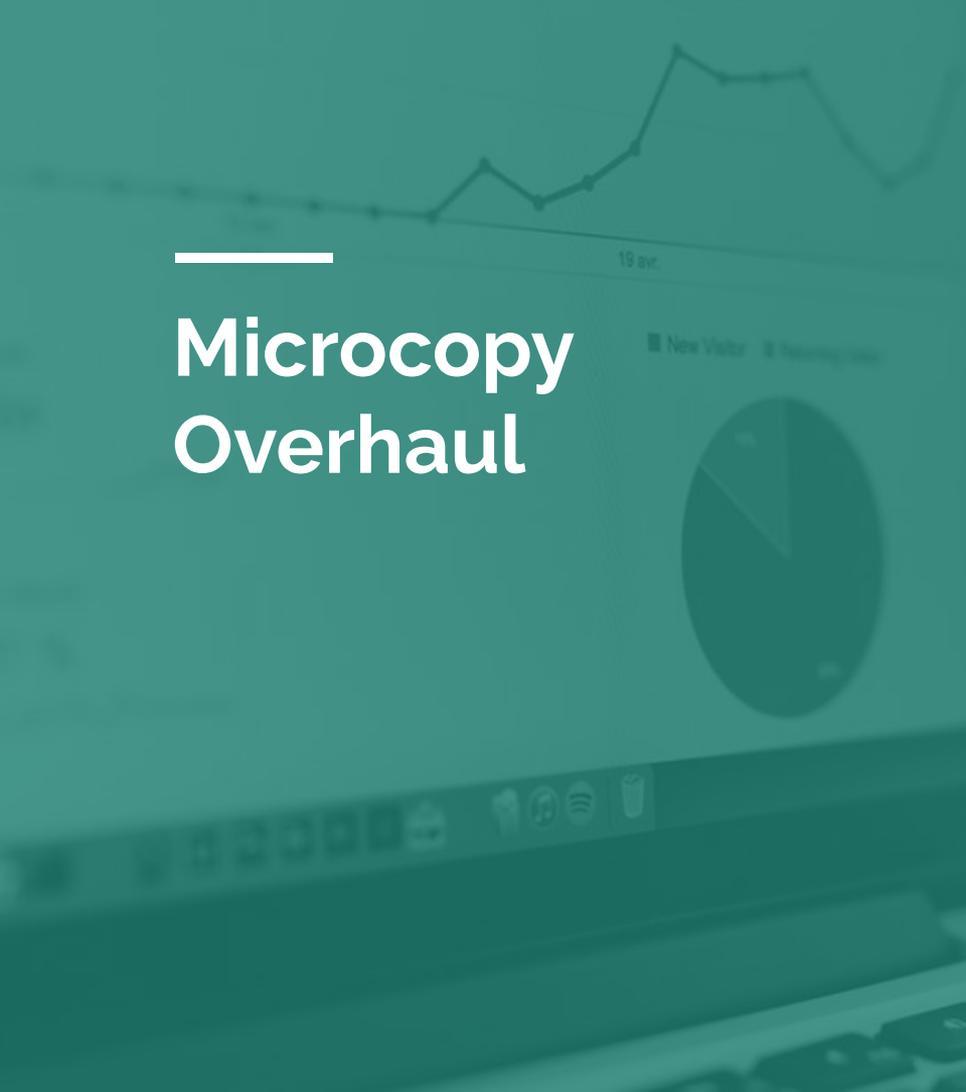
# Problem Statement

People need to understand their options better when they navigate Chess.com--this is especially true for older and less tech literate people.

It may be easy enough for people to play a simple game, but even challenging a friend is difficult for some.

For instance, Margie could start doing the lessons regularly, but she has to find them first. Jack might become a more social player if the site made remote chess nights more intuitive. So I decided to rework the copy and help them out!

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# Microcopy Overhaul

**I rewrote virtually everything a user reads as they start a new game.**

One huge thing I encountered was that functions are often labeled misleadingly, and some look almost identical.

No wonder people are confused when “Lessons” and “Openings” are separate categories!

With clarity and a few nudges toward functions they might have missed, users will be able to find what they need!

# New Home Page

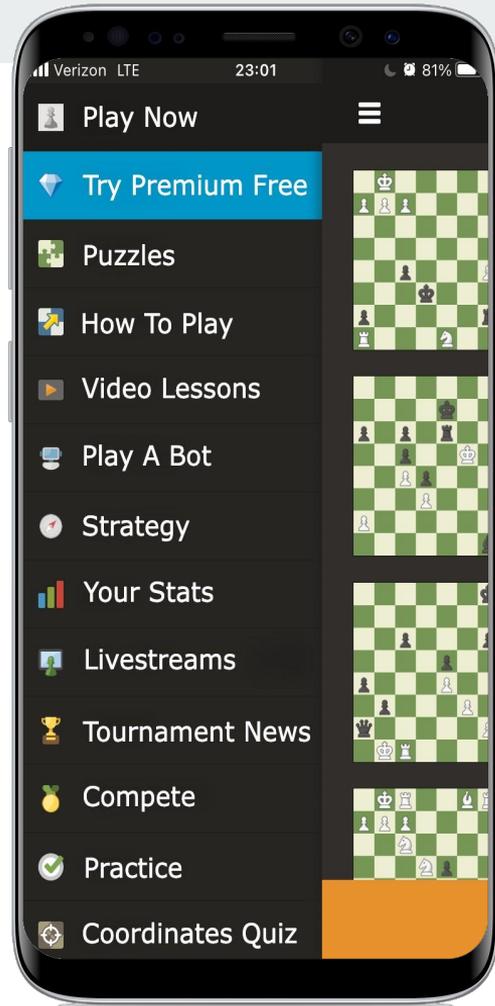


The most obvious change here is the “Play Now” button, but there’s another sneaky change I made to this screen!

At the top, I changed the bell icon into an envelope, to more accurately represent the messages feature.

A bell looks like a general notifications icon, but then it looks like there are two sets of notifications for some reason.

# New Menu

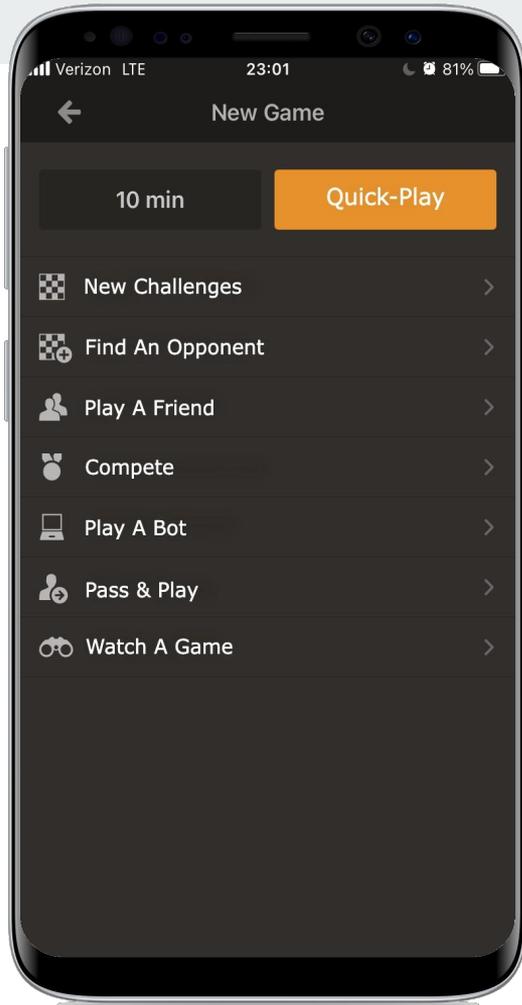


The other entry point to starting a new game was the menu! These new labels help users start the game flow, as well as helping them find anything else they're looking for.

As you can see, a user can play a Chess game with the "Play Now" button, the "Play A Bot" button, and the "Compete" button. That's due to the menu issues, which I'll get to later.

Incredibly, there's a whole other page worth of features on this menu, but the app lets you figure that out yourself! (I limited myself to the top of the menu due to time constraints.)

# New Start Game Page

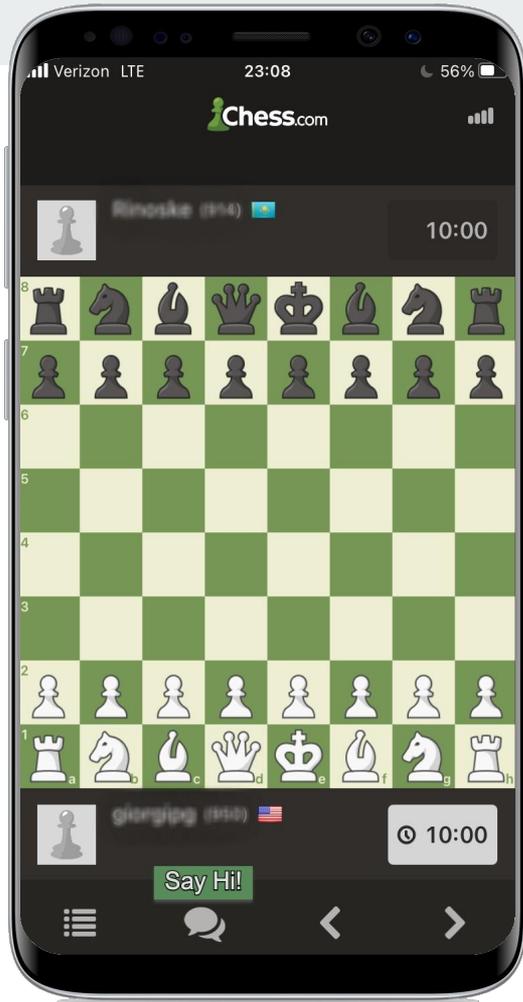


One thing you might have noticed is that there are options for different modes of play, but there's also a "Play" button up at the top. What's up with that?

That button takes you to a basic live game with another randomly matched player; the options below are more specific. I changed the copy to reflect that!

While I was at it, I gave the whole menu new copy to better represent the features.

# New Game Play Page



When I got to the gameplay page, I thought I was stuck. Since it was just icons, how could I change the microcopy?

Then I flipped the question and asked, is there anywhere that needs microcopy?

If the goal of Chess.com's design is to help them learn more in-depth chess strategy while socializing, maybe a nudge to do one of those things during a game would help!

Since a person might not want to take a lesson during a game, I decided to prompt people to message their opponent with a little dialog box by the chat tab.

Another possibility for the copy could be: "trash talk? ;)"

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# Proposal Re: Navigation Design

**While it's not in scope for a UX rewrite, I would love to redo the menu for clarity too!**

All those different gameplay features could be in their own folder. Same goes for the educational content and social functions!

That way, the menu wouldn't be a big overwhelming list. Someone looking for social features could go to that sub-menu, then choose an option.



# What else could be improved?

- **More remote play features!** The video game platform Steam has released tons of features to help people play online.
- **Wider testing, with behavioral data.** If I came up with these improvements without having access to most of the information Chess.com has available, who knows what new insights could come from more research?
- **Content strategy to build a more engaging brand.** My experience as a content strategist tells me that engaging people with external communications is just as important as inviting design. Why wait for another *Queen's Gambit* when we could start reaching out to potential users now?



# Thanks for reading!

I had a great time with this redesign, and hope I've given you an informative window into my process.

