



DUOLINGO CHESS

**Making an Intimidating
Game Feel Learnable**

An Independent Elijah Burgess case study
— *not a launch I worked on. This is how I'd analyze it.*



THE PROBLEM

High cultural awareness. Almost no on-ramp.



Not a knowledge gap

Everyone already knows chess is “good for you.” That’s not what’s stopping them.



A confidence gap

The standard path frontloads visible failure against a stranger, within minutes of starting.



Unserved segment

Chess.com, Lichess, Chess24 all assume the user already knows how to play.

3



MARKET OPPORTUNITY

Chess had tailwind. Duolingo had proof.



2nd

time Duolingo proved a non-language subject could work — Math + Music, 2023



3 for 3

Chess.com, Lichess, Chess24 — all built for players who already know how to play



Chess was the third proof point, not the first experiment.

WHO THIS WAS BUILT FOR

Two profiles. Same underlying fear.

RE-ENTERING

The Lapsed Player

Learned the rules as a kid, forgot enough that re-entering feels like starting over. Doesn't want to be embarrassed relearning basics in public.

→ Needs permission to relearn privately

CURIOUS OUTSIDER

The Culturally-Curious Non-Player

Sees chess in their feed — clips, drama, streamers — but has never played a full game and doesn't know where to start.

→ Wants to stop feeling lost, not improve a rating

POSITIONING

No opponent — for nearly a year, on purpose.

WHAT IT WAS NOT

- A Chess.com competitor
- An advanced training tool
- A one-time tutorial
- Built around live human play



WHAT IT WAS

- Single-player vs. Oscar (AI tutor) only
- No PvP mode for ~11 months post-launch
- Built to reach ~1500 Elo before any human opponent



MESSAGING

“ Learn chess without feeling overwhelmed. ”

Value proposition: a low-pressure, bite-sized path to real chess competence — no opponent until you’re ready for one.

Why it worked: the pitch borrowed Duolingo’s existing brand promise — “gets better with practice” — instead of leading with mastery or competition.



EXECUTION

“ Meeting the audience where the fear lives — not where chess already is.”

Every channel was chosen to reach people who feel left out of chess, not people already playing it.



TikTok & YouTube Shorts — primary channel

Chess content was already exploding organically post-Queen’s Gambit and chess-streamer culture. The audience was curious but passive — watching, not playing. Duolingo Chess met them inside that content loop with short, zero-pressure “you could actually learn this” messaging, not “compete and win” framing.



Duolingo’s own notification and streak ecosystem

The biggest distribution advantage wasn’t a paid channel — it was Duolingo’s existing habit infrastructure. Push notifications, streak reminders, and the daily-lesson loop already owned a behavioral slot in users’ days. Chess inherited that trust without having to earn it from scratch.



Casual gaming and puzzle app adjacency

Wordle players, crossword users, and casual puzzle app audiences share the same core trait as the target user: they want daily mental engagement without pressure or competition. Targeting this behavioral cluster — not chess audiences specifically — was the reach strategy.



Chess-curious cultural moments (reactive, not planned)

Chess spikes culturally in predictable windows — a big tournament, a streamer moment, a viral game. The execution playbook treated these as amplification windows: already-existing content gets surfaced, organic curiosity is captured, and the “no pressure” message lands when intent is highest without requiring a always-on paid campaign to manufacture the moment.

The execution didn’t go to chess players. It went to the people chess had always left behind.





RESULTS

Publicly reported signals — not internal projections.

1M+

DAUs by end
of Q2 2025

#1

Fastest-growing
course in
company history

~7M

DAUs, early 2026

9 mo.

Green light to
public beta



Read honestly:

Duolingo hasn't disclosed exact DAU or revenue figures for Chess specifically — these come from earnings calls and conference remarks, not a published dashboard. Chess is not yet a material revenue line; its value is engagement and retention lift across the platform.



THE HONEST LIMITS

What this case study doesn't gloss over.



A real skill ceiling

Spaced-repetition cards work for vocabulary. Strategic judgment under time pressure doesn't compress as cleanly.



Bot-trained skill may not transfer

A year of practice against one fixed AI builds pattern-matching against Oscar — not necessarily general chess judgment.



No moat at the destination

Once a learner outgrows the course, the next step is Chess.com or Lichess — built to own the on-ramp, not compete past it.



Retention edge may be novelty

"Slightly better retention" is also exactly what you'd expect from any new feature in a huge, habit-forming app.



LESSONS LEARNED

Four takeaways that generalize beyond chess.

1

Sequencing can be the entire strategy —
delaying PvP was the product thesis, not a gap.



2

Brand permission is earned through repetition —
Chess inherited trust Math + Music built.



3

A real skill ceiling is a legitimate boundary,
not just a limitation to footnote.



4

Engagement numbers and revenue numbers
are different claims — keep them separate.



10

duolingo

STRATEGIC TAKEAWAY

It didn't out-chess the chess platforms.
It built the on-ramp the category had skipped.

The fastest-growing course in Duolingo's history wasn't fast because it taught chess better — it was the only product that didn't ask a beginner to be watched while they learned.



The PMM lesson: sometimes the strongest differentiation isn't adding capability — it's removing the scariest part of the category.

