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[Macologist](#) » [Reviews and Interviews](#) » [Game Review: Chessmaster 9000](#)

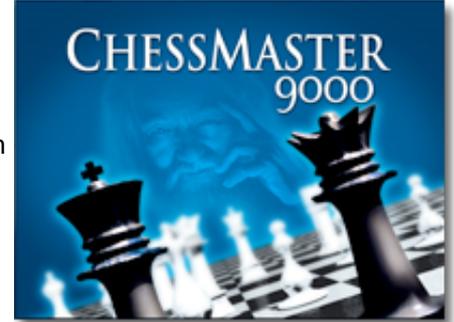
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#1: **Game Review: Chessmaster 9000** Author: **Santaduck**,  Posted: Thu May 05, 2005 2:43 am

## Game Review: Chessmaster 9000

Aquafied for OS X

If you're reading this review, you're probably either a chess player who wants to get better, or someone who just wants to learn the game. In both cases, here's the conclusion first: you should get Feral Interactive's Chessmaster 9000 for your Mac, because the teaching features simply are extraordinary, and will shape you into becoming a better player.



Chess programs fall into a difficult niche in the gaming world. For developers, there's only so much one can do with this concept-- Chess is not really about graphics, and eye candy rapidly detracts from the game itself. A developer must creatively consider bells and whistles to justify a consumer buying their product instead of sticking with an older version, or a competitor's product, or simply buying a book or playing live people. As for players, they fall broadly into three categories: *Beginners* who know how the pieces move, *Intermediate* players with knowledge of some chess theory, and truly *Competition-class* players who already play in clubs. Chessmaster 9000 has something for everyone. Its overwhelming strength is the deep reserve of content for the middle range, from the beginner who opens eagerly with a rook pawn, all the way through to the advanced intermediates who already own a small library of chess books and know the standard openings.

## Overview

**Installation:** The installer on the DVD worked smoothly, and there is a patch (v1.01) available at the [Feral site](#), which also installed smoothly. When multiplayer is selected for the first time, Gameranger will automatically be installed via an OS X VISE installer. While this process went as expected on a newer G5, a system that ran Gameranger in OS 9 earlier in its life may insist on launching into classic to run the VISE installer. If this happens, don't fret, the installer will proceed smoothly, after which Gameranger itself will never force Classic mode.

The first screen is a login screen, so that different users can keep separate Chessmaster accounts for tutorials and game results. After login, the main menu known as the *Lobby* appears.

The lobby contains seven sections: Classroom, Library, Tournament, Game Room, Database, Kids' Room, and CM Live. Each of these will be reviewed below.

**Classroom:** The Classroom features alone are worth more than the purchase price of this game. The real strength of CM9000 is that it really can make you a stronger player, therefore the bulk of this review will focus on this feature.

The classroom is separated into four levels: *Beginning*, *Intermediate*, *Advanced*, and *Josh*, a custom one-on-one exclusive course by International Master Josh Waitzkin, the former child-prodigy whose story was featured in the film *Searching for Bobby Fischer*. Each section contains several areas (for a total of thirteen), including tutorials, drills, puzzles, rating exams, practice sessions, John Nunn puzzles, and in the Josh section, annotated games at the Master level. If it sounds like a lot of content, it is, and it's all impressively executed. These lessons truly comprise an entire textbook, as some of the lessons may approach 200 pages of interactive examples!



Among people who "know how to play chess," the vast majority are not competition-level experts, but simply people who know the rules and a handful of strategies. Most players recognize they could improve (there's always someone better), but don't know how to learn. Learning can be a big black box of mystery, which

often results in giving up on playing at all because progress is hard to come by-- most non-club players have likely reached a plateau without significant progress in years. Memorizing openings for beginner-intermediates is too often a fruitless exercise because typical opponents are also beginners who are unlikely to follow standard openings, and without a knowledge of the underlying *strategy*, there is no way to capitalize on such off-moves-- there is no book on "what to do in openings when the other player doesn't follow the opening."

Here's exactly where CM9000 comes through for "ordinary" chess players. It walks the user through the actual *theory* of what the goals are early in the game through examples and quizzes. It's probably worth it for the intermediate to begin at the lessons included in the beginner tutorials. The examples begin at the very fundamentals. For example, if given a choice between two "bad" beginner openings, which is better and why? What are the issues behind pawn development: how does it affect bishop development, and if you have a choice of capturing the same piece with two different pawns, which should you choose? Did you know that when players have single bishops of opposite color, the situation favors the attacking player?

Suddenly, beginners who stick with king/queen pawn openings will understand and be comfortable with the Sicilian Defense (queen bishop), or pushing knight pawns early (to fianchetto bishops), by understanding basic concepts before memorizing actual openings. The intermediate lessons will cover the strategy behind opening's first four moves, as well as tactical configurations including forks, pins, double-attacks, endings, how combinations come about, and sacrifices. Even if you already know what pins and forks are, some of the examples may expand your notion of what these terms mean-- forks typically attack two pieces, but one alternative can instead be an a positional outcome, such as attacking a piece at the same time as forking to an important square guarded by it.

Advanced intermediates who already own a small library of dusty unopened chess books can also benefit. The *Advanced* section expands upon the theme of teaching the underlying strategy to openings by a *Match the Masters* lesson. A list of master level games are presented, and you must guess the masters' moves through multiple choice with very intelligent alternatives, as well as periodically answering other related questions (e.g. *What was White threatening with move X?*). For most non club players, this method is light-years beyond reading game transcriptions and replaying them on a home chess set-- although it would have been preferable if the *Back* button had not been disabled, since the explanation for a correct answer often comes as a revelation in the opponent's subsequent moves. Unlike any chess book this reviewer has ever read, the *Match the Masters* lesson series opened up a light shined upon how "real" chess players think.



Finally, the sections by Josh Waitzkin are all gems. In some of these, he verbally annotates his past games, so we hear what he was thinking about the game and the opponent's strategy at the time he was playing. He also includes a tutorial on the psychology of competition, as well as an endgame clinic, both with numerous annotated games.

CM9000 is really a fantastic learning tool, this point cannot be emphasized enough. For practical purposes, this review could end here: Buy CM9000 for the Classroom features alone. You simply will get better if you go through CM9000's material, and its presentation will make the process a true pleasure.

**Database:** The *Database* is a deep reference for advanced players. Although the *Library* section (below) contains 800 classic games, the Database has the contents of over half a million, including grandmaster games up to 2002. The database is searchable by position, player, and other fields. These games are displayed as they are played through visually. This feature should have been included as part of the Library, rather than as a separate section in the confusing main menu Lobby, but this is a small quibble for such an exhaustive resource.



**Library:** The library is useful addendum. It includes a 265-page chess glossary (a fully searchable PDF) for the majority of us who don't already own *Lasker's Manual of Chess*. More importantly, there's also a list of 800 annotated *Classic Games* culled from the past four centuries, including several computer matches, such as Kasparov vs. Deep Blue in 1997 and Fritz vs. Kasparov in 1999. Unlike the full Database of hundreds of thousands of games (above), these classic games are each included for a reason, especially the earlier ones. You may pick any game, read the annotation, and be prepared to be pleasantly surprised by what you learn every time. Game analysis can be tedious for the intermediate, but here the CM9000 creators have chosen the most





illuminating examples, and these will each make you smile, or whistle in wonder. For example the Greco (1619) game is short and humorous, and the random choice of Paulsen vs. Morphy (1857) showed players racing to develop their attacks with not a move to lose, featuring beautiful bishop play and a not-so-obvious Queen sacrifice. Wow.

Two quibbles were: 1) the year was not displayed, so it was difficult to remember which game had been chosen, and 2) it is possible to close important windows such as *Annotation* and *Game Status* which must then be reopened in the Windows menu in the top bar.

Also included is an editable *Openings Library*. Its GUI is a branching tree of all possible moves within the list of known openings, so you can see where the standard openings proceed, and at which point the game begins to depart into "unknown territory." This function is accessible in the *Game Room* and is particularly useful for advanced players who tend to play other people who also very well studied in their openings, and the edit function is perfect in this regard.

**Kid's Room:** There is also a complete game-within-a-game, a chess program for kids. Inside the Kid's Room is a near reproduction of the adult version of the game created for younger players. There is a section on learning how to play, as well as more advanced content such as a dozen drill sets, and another dozen tutorials by the younger Josh Waitzkin. The player can also play the computer and track their progress of lessons and games on a chart. There's also a section to practice rated games, with a clock and no hints. The content is sophisticated enough for bright children, and most beginner adults would even benefit from the tutorials here. In fact some of the lesson contents (such as learning how to play) are the same as the adult version. The Kid's Room is not an afterthought feature, but something well-designed. However, set in the adult interface as a selection in the Lobby (with many of the same functions listed in the lobby), it might have fared better (in actual use by kids) as a standalone application.

**Game Room** Here is where to play the computer AI. In keeping with the pedagogical theme, there are many options for teaching you how to become a better chess player, from beginner to advanced. For beginners, illegal moves can be voice-annotated so that CM9000 pleasantly informs you (a hint of a good natured chuckle is detectable) exactly why your move was illegal. The *Mentor* menu has seven options for analyzing your game in real time as you play, such as simple hints and a blunder alert, to more complex tools. For example, using *Chess Coach* you can highlight a list of squares that you or your opponent control. Chess Coach also has options to display content such as legal moves and threatened pieces, as well as the less obvious pinned pieces, skewered pieces, and passed pawns. The *Mentor Lines* option analyzes lines of play with increasing depth of moves as time passes-- so you can see what is likely to happen, and compare it with your own internal analysis.



These coaching functions seemed very useful. Although the "show squares you control" function may seem obvious, it can be surprisingly useful even for intermediates to realize the consequences of various early opening options such as which bishop to develop, or which pawns remain blocked when having a choice of capturing (see blue squares in image).

The computer AI is highly configurable, a strength of the CM engine. At the simplest, one can select playing an opponent from a few broad strength categories ranging from Beginner to Club Player to Grand Master. Opponents can further be edited for personality with traits such as style (e.g., Material/Positional), positional preferences (opposing mobility, control of center, etc.), and numerical valuing of pieces (own Queen=9, opposing Rook=5). Pre-made personalities created with different quirks and overall ratings from beginner to simulations of real 2800+ Masters are also available. In short the Game Room is where you can test your learning from the Classroom to see how well you can apply your newfound knowledge, and the coaching functions are well integrated to help guide this progression.



**Tournament:** One of the strengths of CM9000's *The King* engine is its flexibility in tweaking playing style. In the tournament room, the player can play the computer for "rated" games with various time and computer AI options. In short, these rated games are a good and convenient checkup to see your "real life" progress while trying to improve your technique, if a broad pool of chess players is not available in real life. There's

also the option of creating a virtual tournament, pitting players from the past against current players, or even including yourself.

**CM Live:** Chessmaster Live is the live multiplayer aspect of this game, and is perhaps the weakest part of the product. CM9000 may be used to play other players on a LAN (who also have separate purchases of CM9000 installed), which is a large unlikelihood in most households-- and in that case why not just break out the real chess set? CM9000 can also be played over the internet with other CM9000 owners, by searching for players using the game browser [Gameranger](#). Gameranger seemed to work fine, but for one major detail: there have never been any other CM9000 players listed at any time this reviewer has checked the Gameranger browser. You can try leaving your game up and wait for comers, but it doesn't seem to be a promising approach.

**Other Chess Programs:** These above issues with CM Live make no dent whatsoever on our high recommendations for CM9000. The largest online game communities are usually ones that offer a free service, rather than the purchase of a retail application (unless it's a blockbuster FPS or MMORPG). For example, if you are searching for live chess players, there are plenty of websites which are fantastic, such as [Pogo.com](#), which offers enormous pools of hundreds players at various skills and scads of open tables with easily searchable and configurable settings.

Of course Apple includes a free Chess application with OS X, which is simply what it is: you get to play the AI, and you have a single slider which can select how long the AI is allowed to think; the playing style is not adjustable, and there is no clock. The AI is strong enough for most intermediates, although with the exception of a *hint* function and a few graphical tweaks, there are no other features, not even annotation of past moves. The shareware (\$20) Vektor3 has a larger feature set, including annotation, a position editor, use of an opening book in the AI, a handful of game modes such as adaptive play and blitz. Perhaps most interesting is the analysis mode which adds commentary to the moves once departing from standard openings, the result being technical shorthand being appended to the moves list:, e.g. e4xd5? or Nc3-d5 { **3.34**}. Because of these features, Vektor3 is perhaps not something recommended for the average intermediate, but is a nice package overall for a free download tryout, but if you follow the license and think about the \$20 registration, clearly CM9000 is a wiser choice for a single purchase.

Among other well known chess apps for OS X, there's also [SigmaChess](#), which uses the *HIARCS* engine and UCI protocol and supports chess database queries. Once we get to this level of Chess AI, personal computer Chess strength of the various top engines are roughly equivalent at their highest settings, approximately 2800 ELO, according to Feral. SigmaChess is also more of a "power user" app, with the engine and the game UI being separately licensed, purchased, and installed. Although HIARCS is known for its strength, we should make one thing clear, which is the stratospheric level of play being compared here: The CM9000 engine is also well known for its strength-- its engine *The King* beat the highest ranked US Grand Master in 2002, so the typical purchaser of CM9000 isn't really going to need anything even light-years close to that! The exceptions are competition players who are likely to have ready access to powerful players, as well as a library of chess applications and textbooks, in which case they probably already own both pieces of software to appreciate the different flavors of their AIs. This reviewer has not played SigmaChess, but as far as the feature set listed on their website, there appears to be no teaching function; it looks like an application geared to the true Advanced club player. SigmaChess will run in OS 8.6 and 9.x, so that may be a consideration.

One recent and popular OS X chess alternative is the freeware [Big Bang Chess](#) from the quirky and very Aqua conscious *Freeverse*, which is a well-integrated application that automatically links to your iChat, Mail, and Address Book contacts to invite them to play chess. There's also iTunes and iSight interfunctionality. This level of OS X integration is something CM might seriously consider for future releases of the franchise. Big Bang's graphics and sound are slick and a wonderful extension of the spirit of Aqua, but the AI is utterly abysmal and truly bordering on random. The lesson here is to get the chess app for what you intend to do; your friends are likely to be on iChat, and are likely to download a free chess application, but Big Bang Chess isn't for playing the AI, or improving your game, not by the most generous stretch of the imagination.

In summary, you can use these other chess apps as adjuncts: use Big Bang Chess to play with friends, open a free Pogo.com account to play with strangers, and consider a full library of chess apps if you are or become an advanced competition-level player. However our recommendation is unequivocal: Stick with CM9000 if you actually want to get better at chess. Period.

## Mac vs. Windows

The game runs on a chess AI engine called *The King* (by Johan de Koning, whose name means the "King"), and its first incarnation was on a 68000 processor. This engine can sacrifice pieces for tactical and positional reasons and offers a great deal of flexibility of playing style. The CM wizard's face has long been a fixture in personal computer gaming, but unfortunately the last version available for Mac was Chessmaster 6000 way back in 1998. This reviewer hasn't played a CM title since the Mac CM 3000 and 4000 versions. Consecutive updates have been known to be only mildly incremental, but because the Mac version hasn't been updated in seven years (and an operating system ago), the improvement is quite simply phenomenal, as it should be.

The Windows version is now at CM 10 (the thousand denomination was dropped). However, Mac CM9000 is quite a different beast from Win CM9000, and in many ways shares traits with CM10. CM9000 is best used as an extraordinary learning tool, and in that regard, the few improvements in CM10 in Windows are fairly unrelated to teaching: the online play feature list is a bit extended (to better support tournaments, ladders, and rankings) and graphics now include a CG animation option which is eye candy presumably to broaden the marketing to the children's market. The other major improvement in CM10 is an overhaul of the GUI, but this fact completely becomes a non-issue because the Mac also features an extensive Aqua-overhaul over the original Windows CM9000 code (comparison at right). In short, there is little you will be missing in Mac CM9000 vs. Windows CM 10.



### Quibbles:

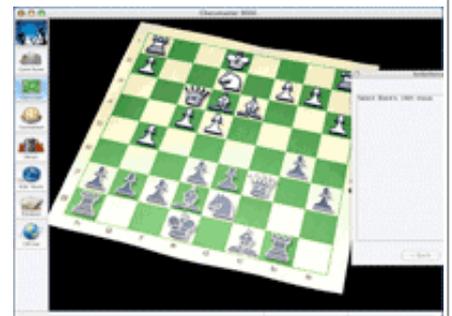
In a perfect world, there are a few oddities that could be corrected with CM9000, but all are small issues. The most frequent annoyance is the DVD check, which requires the user to store the original disk in ready arm's reach to occupy what is often the owner's sole optical drive (although once the game launches, the disk may be ejected). A more sophisticated internet mediated serial number activation would be preferable (No, a backup Toast image does not work). As an example, a gift of CM9000 purchased last holiday season for a family member of the reviewer lies installed but unused, as the original DVD is probably long lost under a pile of home office miscellany.

There are a few issues that seem to be processor-issues (the game was reviewed on a 1st gen 1.8Ghz iMac G5, 2GB RAM). During playback of games (for example classic games or played games), the application sometimes does not detect a mouse click until a few moves have passed and the busy wristwatch pointer is displayed. For example this issue interferes with stopping the action to read the commentary for a particular move in the annotation window.

Also in game playbacks (database, classic games, etc.), the spoken audio of moves (and sometimes commentary) can be seriously buggy in some cases. In automated play of classic games, it seems that as the next move begins, it cuts off the previous audio mid-utterance, or very often before any speech actually begins, an issue also present in the Windows version before the Mac port. Toggling each move manually resulted in no audio. A convenience issue of being able to set a playback timer (similar to a slideshow), or being able to use the space bar to proceed to the next screen (rather than finding and clicking the small Next button) would be nice, and might mitigate the audio bugs. Inconveniently, lesson commentary windows often spawn directly over the playing board, and if closed to view the board, it's not immediately apparent how to reopen them for a first-time user. Also taking back a move is Command-T, but why not the more obvious Mac app Undo standard Command-Z? Feral reports that it is actively working on a 1.02 patch so many of these issues (as well as any with Tiger) may be resolved.

### Graphics

Chess isn't about graphics. That said, graphics options are now an expected feature of the CM series, so here's the rundown. You have a choice of three overall styles of chess board displays: rotatable 3D with shadows, fixed front POV 3D, and top-down 2D. A wide choice of boards and pieces are available, although most players will find it counterproductive to use something too avante-garde. Animation of moves can be set to instantaneous or sliding, and the board POV may be reversed.



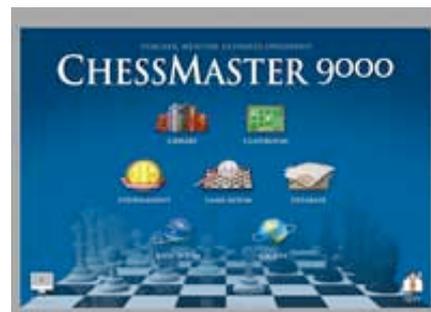
In practice most users will find settings that work, then forget about it.

Typically good sets are the top-down diagrammatic views (such as newspaper or french), or in the frontal and fully 3D modes, the standard Staunton carved pieces in wood or marble are easily visible, with the unadorned board of the same being most unobtrusive. The other artistic variations seem to be a bit distracting. 3D mode can be rotated to a point where it may become difficult to click on a desired piece which

is behind another in your line of site; some tweaking may be required, but it looks nice. If graphics are going to be a consideration, the developers should think about what most users are familiar with in the real world: therefore the wood, marble, and various top-down sets have an easy feel. The one significant omission in the smorgasborg of other fantasy sets was the ubiquitous white and-green rollup board, which was only available in 3D mode, but mysteriously, not in the other two (although the 3D version could be rotated to be roughly equivalent top top-down or frontal).

### Overall Feel

CM9000 can be overwhelming at first, until the user dives in to try some functions. Once ensconced within a tutorial or quiz or game, everything is obvious and works as it should. However before that point, the number of menus and options is a bit confusing, beginning from the seven-item Main Menu Lobby, which should have been a bit more compact: a three-item Lobby would result by separating the Kid's Room into a separate application, combining the Library with the Database, and combining multiplayer CM Live with the Game Room. There are also many options available in the top menu bar, which can also be confusing for the first time user. For example, the chess board options are specific to each section of the Lobby, the *Window* menu has the option of opening or closing seven optional windows, and the Mentor menu further has seven options.



The good news is that the included PDF manual, readily accessible from the Help menu, is more complete than the included paper manual, so if you suddenly have the desire to export your game as a PGN file or edit your opening moves database, the documentation is quite clear and well written. CM9000 is very complete and reminiscent of other large applications such as Word or Photoshop-- there's always more you can do with it, but you can find plenty of satisfaction from the first day, and the application gives you room to grow as you learn more. Occasionally the extra options and their implementation may cause a bit of confusion, but these are easy enough to go around.

### Summary

Chessmaster 9000 for Mac has a clear and important place in any player's library. New players, intermediates, and stronger players will all find something worthwhile in the Classroom function. On the Mac side, nothing else comes close to the polish, feature set, and usability of CM9000 by a large margin, and the Aqua overhaul over the PC version looks fabulous. The menu navigation and many free-floating window options may be daunting at first, but these are easier to use than it seems. Once the tutorials, quizzes, and annotated games begin to roll, it's a pure pleasure-- which means you'll actually use it, and really become a stronger player, and this fact makes CM9000 stand head and shoulders above most any other chess resources for the average player, software or otherwise. A few inconsequential oddities and shortcomings in online play do little to mar a strong recommendation for a complete, nearly perfect product.

Rating:



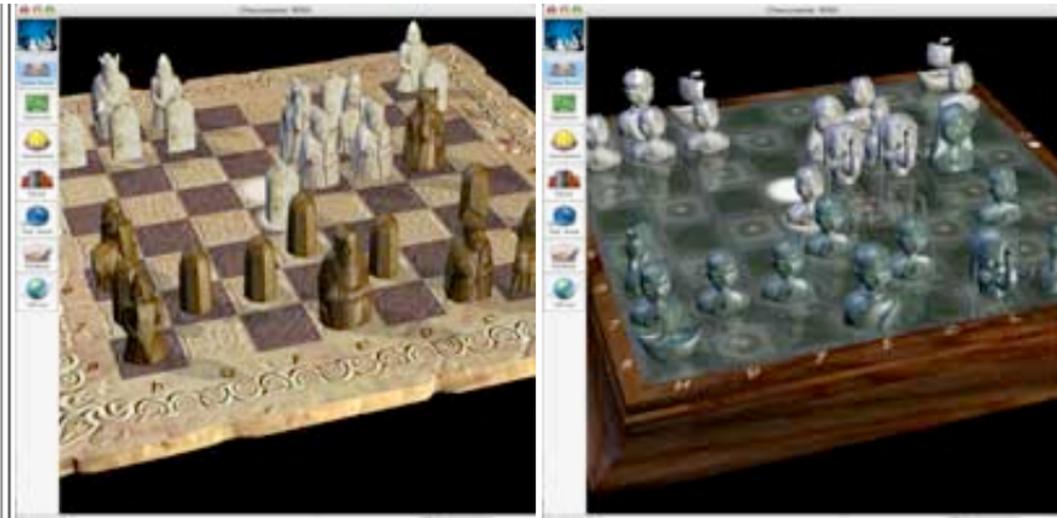
### Links:

[Chessmaster 9000 at Feral Interactive](#) Screenshots, Info, Patches

[1.01 Patch Download](#)

[Purchase at the Feral Online Store](#) \$40/€ 40/£ 30

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**Page 1 of 1**

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