

Defining the Core Problem for Chess Players' Social Experience

1. Introduction

This document represents Stage 2: Define of the design thinking process as outlined by the Interaction Design Foundation. Building directly on the insights gathered during Stage 1: Empathize, this stage focuses on synthesizing research findings into a clear, human-centered problem definition.

The Define stage translates empathy into clarity. Rather than proposing solutions, it identifies what problem truly needs to be solved from the users' perspective.

The findings in this document are grounded primarily in an in-depth interview with the client, Troyan, a former high-school professional chess player, supported by secondary research and observations of broader chess communities.

2. Summary of Empathy Findings (Input to Define Stage)

From Stage 1, several consistent themes emerged across Troyan's experiences and supporting research:

- Chess players experience social isolation, even when playing frequently
- Existing chess platforms prioritize competition, ratings, and performance
- Emotional aspects of chess (loss, growth, frustration, pride) are under-supported
- General social media platforms are poorly suited to meaningful chess discussion
- Players desire recognition beyond winning, including effort, creativity, and learning
- Many players feel unsafe asking questions or sharing mistakes

These findings form the foundation for defining the core user problem.

3. Core User Needs (Synthesized)

In the Define stage, raw observations are clustered into clear user needs.

3.1 Functional Needs

Chess players need to:

- Communicate and share chess-related experiences in context
- Discuss games, ideas, and learning moments without excessive friction
- Connect with players of similar interests, levels, or goals

3.2 Emotional Needs

Chess players need to:

- Feel a sense of belonging within the chess community
- Receive validation that is not solely tied to winning
- Feel psychologically safe when sharing mistakes or asking questions

3.3 Social Needs

Chess players need to:

- Build ongoing relationships, not just one-off interactions
- Learn socially through discussion, mentorship, and peer feedback
- Express identity as chess players beyond ratings and results

4. User Point of View (POV) Statement

To humanize the problem, the Define stage produces a Point of View (POV) statement, combining user, need, and insight.

A committed chess player needs a way to connect meaningfully with other players because current chess environments focus on performance over people, leaving players socially disconnected despite frequent play.

This POV reflects Trojan's lived experience and represents a broader segment of chess players.

5. Problem Statement (Design Challenge)

Based on synthesized insights, the core problem can be articulated as a How Might We (HMW) question:

How might we support meaningful social connection among chess players without centering interaction solely around competition and ratings?

This problem statement is intentionally open-ended, allowing multiple potential solutions in later stages.

6. Key Pain Points (Clearly Defined)

From Trojan's perspective and broader research, the following pain points are most critical:

- Transactional interactions – Most chess interactions end when a game ends
- Identity reduction – Players are reduced to ratings, not personalities
- Emotional neglect – Loss, frustration, and improvement journeys are ignored
- Fragmentation – Chess discussion is spread across platforms not built for it
- Psychological risk – Fear of judgment discourages participation

These pain points define what is broken, not how to fix it.

7. Success Criteria (User-Centered, Not Feature-Based)

To know whether the problem has been addressed in future stages, success should be measured by:

- Players feeling more connected to other chess players
- Increased willingness to share games, questions, and experiences
- Reduced fear of judgment or elitism
- Stronger sense of community identity

These criteria remain user-outcome focused, not solution-focused.

8. Constraints and Considerations

The Define stage also acknowledges constraints derived from user research:

- Chess culture values seriousness and skill—solutions must respect this

- Competitive players still value performance and improvement
- Over-socialization risks diluting the chess focus

These considerations will guide ideation without narrowing creativity prematurely

9. Refined Problem Definition

Bringing all elements together, the refined problem definition is:

Chess players, particularly those invested in long-term improvement, lack a socially meaningful environment that supports emotional expression, learning, and identity—resulting in isolation within a fundamentally social game.

10. Conclusion

This Define-stage document translates empathy into focus. By grounding the problem in Trojan's lived experience and broader chess community patterns, it establishes a clear, human-centered challenge without prescribing solutions.

This clarity will enable the next stage—Ideate—to explore solutions that genuinely address user needs rather than surface-level symptoms.