

A review of Chebache posted March 9, 2000:

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Chebache: Very Deep Backgammon



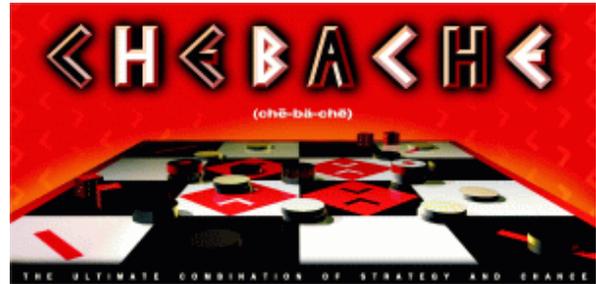
Abstractions

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How often have you seen a game described as an original combination of chess, checkers, go, and backgammon only to find it utterly lacking in originality? It's presumptuous to compare any new game to such a classic standard. Whenever I see such hype I am very skeptical. My response is typically: well, perhaps, but let's wait a thousand years to find out.

Along comes Chebache, which claims to be a "strategic board game combining elements of Checkers, Backgammon, and Chess and bridging the gaps between them." Is there any truth to this bold claim?

After playing Chebache virtually nonstop for two months and finding the game play consistently engaging and interesting, I can say with confidence that it's less a combination of these classic elements than an original game in its own right, best compared to a very deep backgammon. It has an elegant, extremely well conceived structure, providing the players with accessible but complex decisions. Most important, it's terrific fun, even exciting to play.



The Board and the Moves

Chebache is played on a board of 16 squares (four by four). The object is to move your pieces (either black or white) from one corner to the diagonally other corner, traversing a route comprising 18 points, corresponding to a zigzag diagonal line. The four middle squares contain tivits (^) which denote a directional change.

At the start of the game each player has a stack of four pieces in the start square and four stacks of two pieces each placed on the corresponding tivits. The black and white paths intersect alternately. Similar to backgammon, these places of intersection are vulnerable points where pieces may be attacked and returned to start. In addition, the game's geometry allows for the creation of triangular configurations that surround and threaten (check) the opponent's pieces, which is called a "chebache." Hence there are no safe zones in the game. Pieces are vulnerable either by replacement capture or by chebache. The chebache formation is an ingenious device and the heart of the game's originality.

Movement is fueled by the roll of two dice. As in backgammon, the roll can be either one or two pieces. Additionally, pieces on tivits may move backward or forward. At the end of your move, you have the option of jumping your own pieces Chinese Checkers style -- allowing for dynamic leaps through multiple zones. Each player has a king, a double piece that may move backward or forward. There are additional rules governing movement and capture, which will take a few games to get used to. Nevertheless, Chebache is relatively easy to learn; before long you'll be playing it as if you've known it forever. The rules are clear and well illustrated. The game was designed with great care and diligence and it comes with strategy hints, a respectful introduction exploring its genesis, and very helpful suggestions for learning the game's most important concepts. It's obvious that the designer cares deeply about the game and its players.

Like Backgammon Only More So

I enjoyed my first half-dozen games and thought Chebache was light and fast moving, though no more than a new spin on backgammon. But soon I began discovering the game's great depth as I learned how to visualize the various dimensions of the chebache configuration. After developing what I thought was an impregnable strategy based on a series of gradual positional maneuvers, I found that these positions revealed both strengths and weaknesses.

Chebache's magic lies in the ever-changing game flow. The die rolls yield an array of agonizing choices, constantly forcing you to choose between short-term gain and longer-term position. You can set up elaborate traps and seductions -- leaving pieces out for capture to ensnare your opponent -- or you can play cautiously.

(over)



The three black pieces in a triangular arrangement form a "chebache," attacking the white piece below them.

Chebache feels like backgammon in that you can establish a lightning fast "running game," a stubborn defensive approach, or a cautious positional orientation. Yet unlike backgammon, the diversity of pieces and movement allows you to mix and shape these strategies, even to hide them, only to spring them on your opponent as the die rolls warrant. New dimensions continuously unfold. It always appears that you know more about the game than you really do.

Since it's played with dice, luck is a significant factor. There will be games (although rare) in which despite your best efforts your opponent will pull out a last-move victory. Depending on your approach to strategy games this will either infuriate or delight you. The game is exciting because you always feel you can come from behind, and indeed sometimes you can. Over the long haul the superior player will unquestionably prevail. (There are suggestions for tournament rules.)

Think or Thwim

As you gain more experience, you always come across unprecedented situations. That is the virtue of chance. Although the die rolling is prominent, you always feel (but not always correctly) that you have control of your destiny. When you are proved wrong you are never completely sure whether it was fate or blunder. This is intrinsic to Chebache's charm and mystery. Dice promote irony, arrogance, and humility -- it's interesting to watch these dispositions emerge during the course of an evening's play. Chebache plays with your head a bit.

Despite its depth, Chebache is hardly a brain-busting game. It typically takes 45 minutes to play. You can ponder the board for quite a while, but the fact is that the next die roll will change matters. I adore games in which a modicum of chance informs my decisions and in which a winning approach is best served by a combination of long-range strategy and versatile short-term thinking. As the designer suggests in the 15th and final strategy hint, "be one with the dice." It's this combination of fast movement, die rolling, and deep positional play that makes Chebache so entertaining. It's a game you just want to take out and play.

Chebache reminds me of Prince Joli Kansil's great game Marrakesh, in which backgammon provides the template for what is otherwise a completely original game. The template is the source of a perennial *deja vu* -- haven't I played this before? It builds on the compelling, addictive quality of backgammon, respecting the wisdom of its thousand-year tradition. Both games then go off in original new directions. Marrakesh uses ingenious card play and a terrific scoring system, layered on backgammon's bearing-off dynamic. Chebache uses beguiling positional and territorial situations to extend backgammon's strategic reach. Whether or not Chebache will be played a thousand years from now, it was designed with respect for backgammon's noble tradition, moving it into a new venue.

If you are looking for an exciting game built on familiar principles, that has an addictive quality and will also stretch your strategic faculties, I strongly recommend Chebache. I love this elegant game and I think you will too.

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