



The Attraction of Online Bridge

My name is Jeremy Dhondy and I am the Chairman of the English Bridge Union.

This column is to answer questions or comments about the EBU that you might have.

If you have a comment or a question I would be happy to hear from you. jeremy@mrbridge.co.uk

Q What is the attraction of online bridge and why do players participate?

A Like many activities, bridge is subject to change. In my experience, players are quite often resistant to change.

Online watching

Most bridge players have a computer in the house and growing numbers have smart phones or tablets. If this is not your thing you can, of course, feel free to ignore bridge online. The first area in which bridge has changed is for those who like to watch bridge. World Championships contain the best players in the world but the events were remote from England with no realistic way of watching what was going on. There are now services such as BBO (Bridge Base Online) and more recently Funbridge, who show major championships wherever they are in the world.

I first noted how popular this might be when I was in Monaco in 2003 and in the audience for the very exciting final stages of the Bermuda Bowl. The result depended on the very last board. There were several hundred people in the audience but over 14,000 watching online and that was 14 years ago. Several tournaments in England are also covered. The software is free and participation is also free.

Online playing

People are busier than ever these days and quite a few of those who play bridge find that family life and work get in the way. Rather than give up bridge because going to a tournament or club night is just not possible, one can take part in an online game. The EBU tried BBO three or four years ago but the games did not bring a high enough number of players to be viable. One reason for this might have been the Americanisation of the game so we have recently started another game, this time with Funbridge (www.funbridge.com). You can get their free app at the Play Store (Android) or App Store (Apple) on your mobile device or download their free software on a PC or Mac. If that sounds like gibberish, then a shorthand is that it works on pretty much any device. You have the opportunity to play four-card majors with a weak no-trump, if that is your preference and there is no need to find a partner or teammates as the other players are perfectly behaved robots. You can play a casual game lasting only four boards if you wish or play in a tournament. You get given some free hands when you first register so you can practice before starting out on a tournament. Tournament games, which last 20 boards, cost €2 and give master points for those who are successful. You don't have to be an EBU member to play, although you do

if you want masterpoints. So, if you have a sleepless night or an afternoon off you can play. I still like face to face bridge, but if I am on the train and have a Wi-Fi connection then I'd prefer this to solitaire or reading depressing news headlines. There is a review of it at www.ebu.co.uk/node/2822#cost if you would like more detail.

Join the club

As well as the online game there is the online club. Bridge Club Live is a UK based operation and many of the players are British and not robots at all. This system charges an annual fee (you can also join on a monthly basis) but games thereafter are free. If you register as an EBU member then master points are given and as a member you can get a 50 day free trial to see if you like it. BCL also has a forum where you can ask questions and make comments.

The world of the forum has taken off in recent years and one forum at www.bridgewinners.com went into meltdown at the point where a number of international players were accused of nefarious practices. Suddenly a dozen or 20 comments a day turned into so many that a new server was required to stop the website from crashing.

The EBU runs an annual online knock out competition (with a plate competition for early losers). It starts in January.

An honest game?

Sometimes the online game is portrayed as being a bit for the loner but there are online chat facilities. You can't talk to a partner during the game for obvious reasons, but you can chat with an opponent. You might want to ask about a bid, for example. You can even socialise at the end of a set. A concern people have relates to possible cheating.

In the game at the club players tend not to worry about illegal signalling or other devious methods and if they believe someone will look at their cards they hold them up. For sure there are dishonest online players as there are dishonest face to face players but it is sensible to keep this in proportion. The online game providers do keep checks on obvious things so if, for example, one logged on at two computers in the same household to play online this is detectable and players who regularly get 75%+ might be given a closer look. Technology could assist further: for example, cameras linked to Skype could help keep the game honest but for the same reason the local game in the club is not held behind screens, this is not all that likely as it just brings a further barrier into playing the game.

Help and analysis

Going online can be fun even if you have no intention of playing in an online competition. After I play in my local club it takes me about 25 minutes to drive home and by the time I arrive not only are the results online but also analysis of the hands, all the scores on each hand and a wealth of other information. I sometimes play an additional game of looking to see what my score might have been if partner and I simply avoided completely trivial errors. That can be a sobering experience. Often the hand copies you get after the game or online show the contracts that could be made and although the program that does this, Deep Finesse, is very good at dropping singleton kings offside, nonetheless it can be quite instructive as to why 3♠ only makes from the North hand and not the South hand. You can get the program for free by going to

www.deepfinesse.com and you can enter any hand of interest into it. When you read a bridge article explaining how you might have made 4♥ if only you had done x, y or z you can be sure it was checked first with Deep Finesse. All this compares favourably with scoring by hand which takes much longer and in tournaments a big gap between sessions was needed for the scores to be produced manually.

Both the EBU and Mr Bridge keep an archive of magazines on their sites and increasingly records are kept online for those who have a sense of history. Recently a history of bridge in England from its start to 1945 was written by Richard Fleet and can be found on the EBU website.

Finally

There has been a sea change in the way bridge is played and watched.



The picture above shows the 1933 match between an English and American team for the Schwab Cup. Even in the 1980s the Sunday Times/Macallan contest held in London attracted a significant audience.

Nowadays it is easy to watch in the comfort of the living room together with some commentary. Each year there is a competition solely for computers playing bridge. It takes place alongside the World Championship for real people. A program called Jack has been the winner in recent years but in 2016 the world title was won by Wbridge5. Thus far the programs have not taken the world by storm in the same way as Deep Blue did in Chess but they are steadily improving and now play a credible, if not world beating, game. ■