

Bridge Apps

tested out by Jonathan Clark & Kripa Panchagnula

Digital Playing



A couple of issues ago we looked at apps designed to teach bridge. This time around we are looking at the various ways to play bridge online, and who better to put the apps and websites through their paces than two of our U26 stars - Kripa Panchagnula and Jonathan Clark.

IBRIDGEPLUS



This is a one-player app, just playing against robots. It is only available on iOS devices, but there is a similar app called WizBridge+ which is available on all mobile devices. There are four game modes: teams, Chicago, rubber and duplicate. The last option is the only version in which your scores are compared against other people which is also done anonymously.

SYSTEM: 5/5

The app comes with a multitude of systems that the robots can play, ranging from various types of Acol to 2/1, strong club to some basic continental standard systems and you can play whatever tickles your fancy. Each system comes with a detailed pdf which can help you decide what to play but all the bids are explained during the auction too. You can also set different systems for you (NS) and opponents (EW) to play.

ACOL: 5/5

The app comes with seven different kinds: basic, standard, intermediate, advanced, Swiss, Benji and

‘Bernard’s Acol Bidding’ so you can choose to play whatever you are comfortable with!

COST: 3/5

You can get 16 boards for free which can be replayed over and over. Batches of 100 hands can be bought for £0.99 a go which are device specific but once exhausted they are removed. Lifetime access to all 2.6 billion deals, which are synced across devices, can be purchased for £13.99.

NAVIGATION: 4/5

It is very easy to navigate; all the buttons are fairly self-explanatory and neat.

DESIGN: 5/5

Text comes in two styles: modern (sans serif) or classic (serif). The colour scheme and various other settings can be customised to your preference.

BIDDING AI: 3.5/5

Usually good, but the bids have pretty wide definitions so it can sometimes be tough to judge the right spot. It also doesn’t cue bid that often and won’t always pre-emptively support you. If you happen to protect in the pass-out seat, it sometimes thinks you have more than you do so you can end up too high or in the wrong strain.

CARD PLAY AI: 4.5/5

This can be customised to low, medium or high simulation so it is good. Defensive carding can be customised to however you prefer: reverse and standard attitude and count, discards etc.

EXPLANATIONS

All bids in the auction are explained if you click on them.

Overall mark: 4.3/5

App store rating: 4.4/5

Google Play rating: Not available on Google Play

BRIDGE BASE ONLINE



Probably the most used online bridge playing app, BBO is available on all laptop and mobile devices. Mostly used for playing with and against people, it can also be used as a one-player game and scores compared against friends or strangers in challenges. The other feature is watching Vugraph, where international events across the world are shown online.

SYSTEM: 3/5

Most people will play 2/1 or SAYC but you can come across all kinds of weird and wonderful systems. If you want to only play with and against Acol players, there is a special Acol club which can be navigated into, but there might not be tables in play or it may be slow to fill.

Robots will only play 2/1, and for a detailed description there is a system file online which includes its carding agreements. However, there is no need to read the bidding section (unless you want to!) as the bids are described when the robot bids and your potential calls are described as you hover over your intended selection.

COST: 4.5/5

One of the best features about BBO is that it is free to use. However, if you would like to play against robots (bidding practice is free), you will have to put some money on your account. Basic is \$1 per week, advanced \$1 per day. Juniors can get them for free if they email: aurora@bridgebase.com and provide some form of identification.

NAVIGATION: 3/5

It is intuitive. There are several links but only a few ever need to be used, and there is not much difference between the main and relaxed bridge club.

DESIGN: 3/5

The laptop version recently changed to become more in line with the mobile app, but the old one can still be accessed. There are a few customisable settings, but these are only to do with how the cards are shown (pictures/diagram) or auto play singletons and sound effects etc.

MANNERS: 4/5

Usually pretty good but, as in real life, you can come across some unpleasant people. The main complaint is not playing fast enough which can be taken out of proportion as some people are just a bit impatient and don't let declarer think, but this doesn't happen too often.

BIDDING AI: 3.5/5

The robot's bidding is a tad old-fashioned; it will get you in the right spot most of the time, but if you try to be clever or make a bid without checking its description correctly the auction could get out of hand. It also doesn't cue bid often, so you will miss out on some good, low point count slams.

CARD PLAY AI: 3.5/5

The difference between basic and advanced robots will be the number of simulations they make before playing a card. They will lead 4th best, small from xxx, passive vs NT and shortage vs suits. These rules are almost religiously followed so not returning the suit you led at trick one is fairly normal! They play standard attitude and count, but nothing on discards. However, given that the simulations are double dummy, it will do seemingly bizarre things like leading a stiff K offside or solving a 2-way finesse position as it assumes declarer will always get it right.

EXPLANATIONS

With the robots all bids are explained – you just need to hover over them. Some may not mean what you expect! Against people, bids are self-alerted, and partner cannot see this until the end of the hand.

Overall mark: 4/5

App store rating: 2.7/5 (very wide ranging, most low ratings due to bugs in previous versions)

Google Play rating 4.1/5

BRIDGE CLUB LIVE



BCL is available to play through its website – there is no dedicated app. It is also the only one reviewed which contains no robots. The hands are played live, against other real people and scored up instantly.

SYSTEM: 4/5

When you sign up, you can tick various systems that you are able to play, and this is attached to your profile. This allows you to play with compatible partners.

COST: 3/5

There is a free version, which only allows you to enter the Bridge4Free MPs room. Here you can play up to 96 hands a day and eight boards gets you on the leader board. There are two paid subscriptions: social (£36/year) which gives you access to more rooms, comment boards, emailed results, coaching, full hand records including the bidding and play at all tables; full (£72/year) which allows more system disclosure and entry to various IMP/MP tournaments and gives you a rating which works similarly to the NGS.

NAVIGATION: 2/5

There are a lot of links, but very few need to be used. Once in the bridge room, you can sit at an empty seat, or choose to spectate (see all the hands) or kibitz (select one hand).

DESIGN: 1/5

The lobby page (before joining a table) is very cluttered, but it does filter tables with empty seats to the top. The right-hand side of the page has a results section and a chat section neither of which can be minimised even while playing hands (the results section becomes the bidding box during the auction).

MANNERS: 4/5

Generally pretty good, the website does have an ethics policy and members violating it can be

warned or removed from the site if deemed severe enough.

EXPLANATIONS

The website generally follows the WBF alerting rules (these can be found in the main hub, before entering the lobby or bridge rooms) and you must alert partner's bids much like you would at the table.

Overall mark: 2.8/5

App store rating: only playable through website
Google Play rating: only playable through website

SYNREY

Available on computer and mobile devices, this is another app where you can only play against robots but compare your scores against other humans. There are various game modes: IMP challenges (12 boards), MP challenges (12 boards), tournaments, robot challenges (two boards) and friend challenges.



SYSTEM: 2.5/5

The robots only play 2/1, but there is a detailed convention card online.

COST: 3/5

The daily challenges are free and coming in the top few people will earn you some coins which can be spent on buying robot challenges which can be sent to friends and tournament entries. Coins can also be bought in the following way: 25-\$0.99, 135-\$4.99, 300-\$9.99, 1650-\$49.99, 3300-\$99.99.

NAVIGATION: 4/5

This is very easy as there are only a few options to go through to start playing.

DESIGN: 4/5

Quite nice, very clean as there are very few options, but can't be customised.

BIDDING AI: 4.5/5

Usually better than basic BBO robots as the auctions are more cooperative, but you can be punished for taking some aggressive actions. There is a limit on how far you can deviate from the bid description – for example it won't let you open weak 3s on 0 counts, even in the third seat.

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Sometimes they will also remove you from 3NT for no apparent reason to 4♣/♦. Perhaps it thinks you don't have enough stops, but beyond that it is good.

CARD PLAY AI: 4/5

They lead 4th best and give standard attitude and count, and suit preference in some situations. At MPs, they will always cash out when it's right but at IMPs they may let a few overtricks through. However, they can also solve a few guesses for you when you lead up to honours, as they like to rise in front of them.

EXPLANATIONS

All bids are explained – click for a description.

Publisher's comments

Synrey bridge aims to make it easy for beginners to learn bridge. It has 'Trick-Taking Bridge' and 'Mini Bridge'. Those two games help more than 100,000 beginners a year learn bridge in China.

Overall mark: 3.7/5

App store rating: N/A, Not enough reviews

Google Play rating 4.2/5

BRIDGE V+

Bridge V+ is available on Android, iOS & Windows 10. Users play against AI which is internal to the app itself, so no internet connection is required. Users can play either rubber scoring or Chicago using any of the two billion preloaded hands. Users can play the same hands as each other using a hand ID code.

Additionally, for bridge learners, the app has an auto-bid/play option designed to allow players to focus solely on one area of their game and the app allows the player to request hints/take-backs at any point in the bidding or play.

Bridge V+'s engine has been taught in an 'organic' way. They use hand simulations to test their bridge engine, and make alterations if they are found to improve the engine's performance.

SYSTEM: 2.5/5

If you uncheck all the system settings, the app plays 4-card majors, 16-18 NT and strong twos. It



also plays Stayman, Gerber, Blackwood, and Strong Jump Shifts by default.

In the app options you can toggle: 5-card majors, Weak NT, Jacoby transfers, Weak 2s, Strong 2♣, and 11-12 2NT for both you and the opponents.

ACOL: 2.5/5

The app gets most of the basics of Acol right with a few notable exceptions. For example, doubling a weak NT is for takeout; bidding 2♥ over 1♠ can be done with four hearts and a side four-card minor.

COST: 5/5

Free but with video adverts after every hand or £5.99 for full access with no ads.

NAVIGATION: 5/5

There are two different game modes – rubber and Chicago. Navigating between them via the home screen is quick and easy. Conveniently, the game settings and design settings can be accessed easily while playing a hand.

DESIGN: 3/5

You can customise the suit order and card order of your hand, and whether you want the program to move trumps to one side of your hand once they've been chosen.

The page is a little crowded (the screenshot was taken on a 5.8" screen) and during the card play cards go onto multiple lines. You can change this in the settings so the cards stay on one line, at the cost of them being more bunched. That said, if you play on a PC or tablet, overcrowding is not a problem.

BIDDING AI: 2/5

While the program will reach reasonable contracts most of the time, there are some situations in which it struggles, namely raising partner's suits preemptively and trusting partner's judgement (for example when it had a weak opening hand and a seven-card minor, it would remove my 3NT to 4♣/♦). On occasion, in uncontested auctions, the program will land in the wrong strain at the game level and you can take big penalties.

Stylistically, you may be interested to know that the app doesn't count points for a singleton honour unless it is an ace. This decision was made based on their hand simulations.

CARD PLAY AI: 3/5

Like most bridge AI, the robots make frequent errors, particularly by under-leading honours into

your tenaces, and not cashing out correctly in defence. The latter may be because the robots don't play count signals. In terms of agreements, the bots play 4th highest leads, K from AK, otherwise top of sequence, top of doubleton. Standard attitude.

EXPLANATIONS

Explanations are given for the robots' bids and for your own bids after you make a call. If the call was not what you intended you can use the take back feature to replace your bid with a different call. The explanations include the point count of the hand and the number of cards promised in the suit bid.

Overall mark: 3.3/5

App store rating: 4.1/5

Google Play rating 3.9/5

FUNBRIDGE

Funbridge is a mobile and PC-based application. Unlike the other main bridge apps, Funbridge users always partner and play against the program's AI. Their scores are then compared with other users all of whom held the same hand.

It offers users a variety of play modes including a fortnightly ladder-style league (MP), direct challenges vs friends (IMPs), random practice boards, learning-the-basics boards with written commentary, and difficult board challenges with expert commentary.

SYSTEM: 4.5/5

The app has six distinct pre-set systems for you to choose from or you can opt to set up a free profile where you can choose between four basic system types: Acol, Better Minor, Short Club and Polish Club, and four different NT ranges: 12-14, 15-17, 16-18, 14-16. Regarding two bids, the app can play Strong Twos, Weak Twos, Multi and Muiderberg, Precision 2♣, or Benji. You should be able to play the same system as you do with your regular partner.

The app also lets you customise the responses to your opening bids (WJS, fit jumps, forcing NT), how you bid in competition (Truscott, Lebensohl, Rubensohl), and a few other uncontested auction



conventions such as splinters, checkback and Drury. There are some negative points such as no Jacoby 2NT (though you can play this as 3+ card support and game forcing), and the fact that the app treats responding hands with 5-10 as 'minimum', 11-12 as 'invitational' and only 13+ as game forcing which can't be changed and causes some problems for game exploration.

ACOL: 4.5/5

Overall the app plays and understands Acol bidding very well.

COST: 1/5

€12.99 per month

NAVIGATION: 3.5/5

Navigation is intuitive. The app has separated its features onto separate pages reachable by big navigation buttons from the home page. This set-up avoids cluttering the screen with lots of buttons or text, though it does mean that in order to switch between game modes, or to access your settings, you have to click the home button and start navigating down a different branch of the app from the top.

DESIGN: 4.5/5

There are many features you can customise such as the card back design, whether the deck has two colours or four colours, the card playing sound effects, and whether the program announces each bid, lead, contract, alert, and result as you play.

BIDDING AI: 4.5/5

The robots can understand your bidding quite well but when they bid themselves they are less good. The robots will sometimes jump to final contracts on the balance of probabilities in situations where a human player would often make an asking bid to consult partner. On the other hand, Funbridge has also been continuously updating to remove bugs which users report.

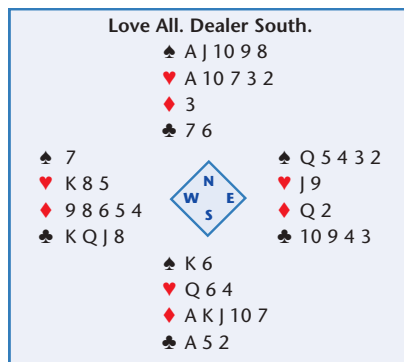
CARD PLAY AI: 4.5/5

Funbridge robots are very good at working out where the cards are, particularly as they are capable of signalling to each other. So, unless the player has misled them in some way, the robots will not make many mistakes near the end of a hand. Earlier on in the hand though, they do make a number of mistakes, particularly when they have little help from the bidding.

Regarding carding, the robots are able to understand effectively a wide variety of signals: Standard Attitude, Standard Count, Reverse Count, and even Suit Preference in a variety of common situations such as when there is a strong suit or singleton in dummy, or when giving

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sixteen boards. IMPs changed hands at a furious rate until:



England played in 3NT by South, not the best spot but despite a club lead and continuation declarer somehow came to eleven tricks. The Dutch were in 6♥, also not the best spot and not without its problems on the lead of ♣K. But South won that, cashed a couple of diamonds to throw a club from the table, played ♥A and another, and later guessed spades to make his slam and take an unassailable lead in the race for the gold medal. The final margin was more than the swing on this board and the Danes were very worthy winners, but of course the English would never bid a slam like that. It wouldn't be respectable. □

partner a ruff. All the signals can be turned on and off individually in the settings. Tip/flaw in software: the AI defenders will give honest count all the time, even in the trump suit, which is very helpful when you need to know if a suit breaks 3-3.

EXPLANATIONS

There are detailed explanations of what every robot bid and player bid means including point count, min/max length in each suit, whether the bid is forcing and what the bid means if it is not natural.

Sometimes the meanings of different bids appear to overlap or one bid may appear to be a subset of another. This doesn't mean the computer will choose between the bids randomly but that the criteria for choosing one bid over another is not always explicit. An example from Acol would be the 2NT and 3NT rebids after 1M-2m, where 3NT appears to be a subset of 2NT. 2NT is described as 15-19 balanced, but in fact shows any 18-19 balanced hand, or 15-17 balanced with a five-card major (such that there is still room to explore a major suit fit), whereas the more narrowly defined 3NT rebid is 15-17 balanced with no five-card major.

Overall mark: 3.9/5
App store rating: 4.5/5
Google Play rating 4.2/5

World Championships – Open & Mixed teams

England fielded three equally strong pairs for the World Mixed Teams Championship: Sally Brock & Barry Myers, Frances Hinden & Graham Osborne and Fiona Brown & Michael Byrne. Paul Barden was the captain.

On the first two days, England beat Romania, Sweden, Barbados, Morocco and Italy, drawing with India. This put them into 1st place, a position they would retain throughout the entire round robin.

In the medal matches they beat Croatia to get into the semi-finals, but having lost they lost again in the bronze medal play-off. This new category in the World Championships will provide plenty of promise in future years.

The Open team comprised top players Tony Forrester & Andrew Robson, David Bakhshi & Artur Malinowski and Jeffrey Allerton & Chris Jagger. Neil Rosen was captain and Andrew Murphy the coach.

The team reached a qualifying position in the round robin and looked set to trounce the Americans in the quarter finals. After four out of six sets England were leading by an incredible 147 to 82. The Americans put on a terrific show in the last two sets to pull through and win by 195-162.

It was a gutting moment but overall a spectacular result. All the England teams had qualified for the quarter finals. Full match reports by David Bird on these two series can be found online, p67. □