



Computer Bridge

by Geoff Davies

YOU may not realise it but your computer, tablet or even smart phone can play a pretty good game of bridge. It may not quite be up to winning the World Championship, yet, but a number of programs can play far better than the average club player. In this article I'm going to look at bridge on a conventional computer. Another article (in the next issue) will look at what's available for tablets or smart phones.

Why Play Bridge on Your Computer?

So why would you want to play bridge on your computer? Well, first and foremost, you don't need three other people. You can play one hand and the computer can play the remaining hands – without cheating! Most programs can deal with a mix of human and computer players so you can always get a game.

Computer bridge is also a great tool for learning, with most programs being capable of dealing specific types of hand to let you hone your skills in a particular area such as slam bidding, or to let you try out that latest convention you are thinking of using. Some programs can optionally be set to comment on your bidding and play – letting you see immediately where you are going wrong.

In addition, if you are lucky enough to play at a club that uses computer-dealt hands and makes the deals available on the internet then you can load the deals that you played and see how the computer would have dealt with them.

What's the Best Program?

What's the best program then? Well, it depends what you mean by best. As far as ultimate performance goes, we can look at the World Computer Bridge Championship which has been running since 1997. The 2014 champion is *Shark Bridge* but the program with the best overall record is *Jack* which has won ten times in all, most recently in 2015 (just after this article was written). If you have a Mac, then *Jack* isn't an option and *Bridge Baron* is probably the best

for you. This won the first championship and has come second a number of times since.

These commercial programs cost in excess of £50 but *Wbridge5*, a three-times world champion, is free and worth a try if you can read a little French, play five-card majors and put up with the lack of polish.

You needn't worry about what system you have to play with the commercial programs. Most have a wide range of predefined convention cards and the ability to tailor them to your tastes. I'm currently playing a cross between Benji Acol and Five-card Majors and *Jack* seems to have no problem with this.

Are the Programs Good at Declarer Play?

The best programs are exceptionally good players of the cards. While we may compare a few different strategies and make a rough estimate of probabilities, these programs deal hundreds to thousands of hands, all compatible with what is known so far, to see what card works best when subsequent play is made double dummy. Look at this deal which I played in a teams match against *Jack*. Both *Jack* and I ended in 6♣ by West and received the lead of the seven of diamonds from North.

♠ Q	♠ A 7 6 5 4 3
♥ A K Q 5	♥ Void
♦ A 10 8 2	♦ J 9
♣ K 9 3 2	♣ A 10 8 6 5

Lazily, since I always find it difficult to estimate how a cross ruff will go, I thought that on a 2-2 trump break I had five clubs, two spade ruffs, three hearts, one spade and one diamond. On a 3-1 trump break I had only four clubs but could possibly set up a long spade. This line failed when drawing trumps revealed North holding Q-J-x and only two spades. After taking the ace of diamonds, however, *Jack* took two rounds of hearts discarding the jack of

diamonds and a small spade, and then embarked on the cross-ruff. Whether North overruffs a spade or not, the contract is still made.



Interestingly, you can ask what *Jack* expects to make by playing different cards at any point. After taking the first trick with the ace of diamonds he estimates his average score as 1372.2 if he plays a high heart. Since $6\clubsuit$ scores 1370, this means he thinks he is slightly

more likely to make one overtrick than one or more undertricks. Playing a small club, however, his estimated average score is 1350.6 – about two thirds of a trick worse.

Putting *Jack* Through its Paces

I tried *Jack* with the February *English Bridge* ‘Prize Leads Quiz’ and he achieved top marks on all three problems. His performance on the February ‘Bidding Quiz’, however, depended upon the convention card used. Playing his own system, *Jack* only scored 32/60 but he scored 41/60 when playing Benji Acol and 45/60 when playing SAYC (Standard American Yellow Card). Six hands is not an extensive test but it does suggest that the program has some way to go to become world class at bidding. Before you write off computers, however, try the bidding quiz yourself with your favourite partner. How do you compare with *Jack*?

A Quick Comparison

We are now going to take a closer look at the programs which competed in the 2013 and 2014 world championships. These are: *Jack*, *Bridge Baron*, *Q-plus Bridge*, *Shark Bridge*, *MicroBridge*, *Wbridge5* (free download) and *RoboBridge* (free download). Limited functionality demonstrations of all the commercial programs are available (though the demonstration for *Shark Bridge* must be accessed through iTunes) so you can try all of the programs for no cost if you are so inclined.

The standard of bidding and play of all these programs is more than adequate and isn’t really an issue in the comparison. In fact, to make a game of

it, I limit the standard of play so that I have a chance of winning. This has the additional advantage that it improves the speed of play. For training purposes, however, I set the best possible standard and accept a few seconds delay.

User Interface



To my mind, *Jack* and *Bridge Baron* offer the best looking user interfaces and are also the most flexible, readily allowing you to take back bids, claim, ask for help etc. *Q-plus Bridge*

has a rather old-fashioned look but a playable interface while *MicroBridge* and *Shark Bridge* are the least playable of the commercial programs with unattractive interfaces and fewer on-screen controls meaning you have to delve into menus or remember control-key sequences to take back a card or make a claim.



A *Q-plus Bridge* screen

Of the free programs, *Wbridge5* has the better-looking interface and functionality. Annoyingly, *RoboBridge* does not allow you to take back a bid you have clicked on by mistake nor to claim the rest of the tricks. It forces you to play out hands to the bitter end even when you have a long running suit.

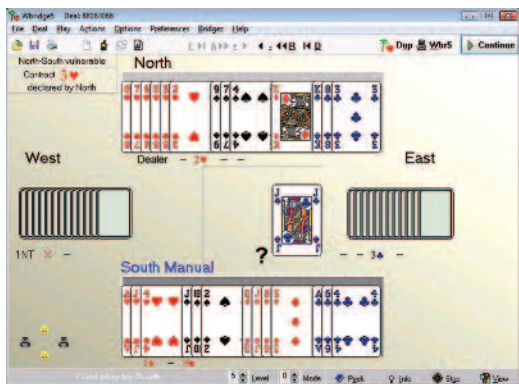
Bidding

Acol players who aren’t too computer literate should probably try *Q-plus Bridge* first since this is the only program which plays Acol by default. People who are willing to spend some time configuring the software to their liking should try *Jack* or *Bridge Baron*. Unfortunately, the free *Wbridge5*

only plays variants of Five-card Majors. This is a pity since it plays well and has a range of useful features. *RoboBridge* has an Acol convention card but offers far less functionality.

by way of a change but *Jack* takes team matches one step further by operating a league system with six different divisions (A – F) with nine teams in each! You start in Division D and after the full round robin has been played you may be promoted to Division C if you do well. Conversely, you may be demoted if you do badly! The higher divisions offer higher standards of play, of course, and fighting your way up the divisions is remarkably compelling.

In addition to tournaments and team matches, *Bridge Baron* offers a wide selection of ‘challenges’ which are declarer play problems where your main concern is to make your contract without looking for risky overtricks. Many of these are quite challenging and will test even experienced players.



The Wbridge5 interface

Tournaments and Matches

When you have played a few practice hands, you might like to try a pairs tournament or a team of four match. Pairs tournaments usually require the program to have a database of hands and results for comparison with your result. The data may come from an actual event or may be simulated by the program playing the hands many times with different convention cards and/or skill settings. *RoboBridge* takes a different approach, however, and uses the internet to let different players play the same hands, each with *RoboBridge* as a partner. You can then compare your results with everyone else's.



A Microbridge auction

Bells & Whistles

Turning now to practice and advice, all programs except *RoboBridge* offer you the ability to generate deals in which different hands contain particular point counts or distributions etc. Only *Bridge Baron*, however, can be asked to deal hands which are suitable for practising selected conventions. This is much more convenient than trying to set deal filters so that hands suitable for practising a particular convention are dealt. As an added bonus, *Bridge Baron* then comments on whether you are using the convention correctly or failing to use it where it would be appropriate.

While most programs can suggest what bid to make or what card to play, *Jack* is particularly flexible and can be set to hint only when requested or to comment on your bidding or play at the time or at the end of the




RoboBridge at play

Team matches are usually scored by comparison of your result on a set of boards with the result when the computer plays all four hands for the same boards. *MicroBridge* offers a three-team match



hand. *Shark Bridge*, uniquely, can give you a text analysis of how to approach the play of the hand. You can then choose whether to play it yourself or let *Shark Bridge* suggest what card to play. This does not make up for the extremely unattractive interface, however.

Uniquely amongst these programs, *Q-plus Bridge* offers a Minibrige mode to introduce complete beginners to the playing of the hand without the complications of an auction. This is ideal to encourage children to try bridge. See the EBU web page for full details (search for minibrige) 

Well now, Christmas is coming and a good bridge program would be a great present from Santa. I hope I've stimulated you to try some of the demos and see which program you'd like.

How to Get a Free Demo or Free Full Program

- Jack:** <http://www.jackbridge.com>
select demo from side menu
- Bridge Baron:** <http://www.greatgameproducts.com/>
select Windows or Mac download
- Q-Plus Bridge:** <http://www.q-plus.com/>
select English site then select Downloads
- Shark Bridge:** <http://www.sharkbridge.dk/>
scroll down for app via iTunes details
- MicroBridge:** <http://www.osk.3web.ne.jp/~mcbridge>
select free downloads
- Wbridge5:** <http://www.wbridge5.com/>
click link following Télécharger
- RoboBridge:** <http://www.robobridge.com/>
select Install

For your own safety, please download demonstration software via the above sites. Other sources may be corrupted with viruses or malware.

Where to Buy

- | | | |
|----------------------|---|--------|
| Jack | http://shop.chess.co.uk/ | £59.95 |
| | search for Jack 6 | |
| Bridge Baron | http://shop.chess.co.uk/ | £49.99 |
| | search for Bridge Baron 25 | |
| Q-Plus Bridge | http://www.mrbridge.co.uk/ | £92 |
| | search for qplus 11 | |
| Shark Bridge | http://www.amazon.co.uk/ | £68.99 |
| | search for Shark Bridge | |
| MicroBridge | http://www.jannersten.com/ | US\$68 |
| | search for microbridge 13 | ☐ |

CAPTION COMPETITION



Gladys!! How come you were caught driving in a bus lane at 8pm last Wednesday? You told me you were at the bridge club all that evening!

THE winner of our June competition, with the caption above, is John MacLeod of Kingston-upon-Thames, Surrey, who will receive a charming bridge mug from our sponsors, Bridge and Golf Gifts Direct (see advert on page 24). Other very good captions were: *It's unauthorised information about you and the club secretary!* (Dave Bryan, Upton, Chester), and *Not even a falsecard on my birthday!* (Frank Fallon, Charminster).

The cartoon for our new competition is below. Please send your bridgy captions (multiple entries accepted) to Caption Competition, *English Bridge*, 23 Erleigh Road, Reading RG1 5LR or by e-mail to elena@ebu.co.uk not later than 20th October 2015. **Don't forget to include your full postal address!**



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