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I want to tell you about the card game called bridge – it's a really awesome game that in the past hundred years has overtaken all the other card games in the world to be the most popular and widespread and challenging of all. The same game is played all over the world – and without being able to understand a word spoken by any of the other players – I could turn up in China and play bridge. All over the world we have the same game, the same rules. [The game is normally played face-to-face but online capabilities for playing bridge have been around for most of 30 years and in the past month have become more popular than ever before. The largest offering is Bridge Base Online \(BBO\) which has been offering free bridge to players all over the world for most of 20 years. You need to find it on the internet \(\[here it is\]\(#\)\), and create an account for yourself. The number of users is unknown but recently evenings have shown over 54000 online and playing at the same time. There are others too, such as FUNBRIDGE where you play against robots throughout – it's got some good features, but I'll just show BBO pictures at this time.](#)

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The game is played by four players with a standard pack of 52 cards – 13 cards in each suit with the ace the highest, then the king, queen, jack, ten and on down to the two as the lowest. The cards are shuffled and dealt out so that each player has random 13 cards. The aim of the game is to win tricks, and as in other card games, a trick is when all four players contribute one card – and we look at them and designate one card, and the corresponding player, as the winner of that trick. Success in the game is just about winning enough tricks. [The online system \(BBO\) will do the shuffling for you, and sort the 13 cards you receive into suits and into order, and display them for you in one of two ways \(pictures or characters\). \[Here are some examples.\]\(#\)](#)

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There are some very simple rules in playing out the cards. We all play our cards in sequence – going round in clockwise order – which means that all but the first player gets to see some of the cards being played to this trick before they choose what to play, but – unless you are the fourth to play – you don't know all the cards for this trick. This is where your card playing strategy comes into play. The most basic rule of all is that you must follow suit if you can; when you have no cards in the suit led you cannot win the trick but can play any card in your hand, and will choose which on the basis of what might win tricks later. But you do have to play one, and we call that play a "discard". Except where we have a trump suit (we'll come back to that later) the winning card will be the highest card of the suit led. The person who wins the trick will lead first to the next trick – something which can be an advantage, and can be a disadvantage; this means that you don't always choose to win tricks – it's your long term strategy over 13 tricks that matters. [We can see this play out online in this example.](#)

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Bridge differs from every other card game and there are 5 differences I need to highlight. The first and most vital is that it is a partnership game. The four players are split into two pairs, and the partners sit opposite each other. We have traditionally labelled the four players as North, East, South and West around the table so that North partners South, and East partners West. When aiming to win tricks it is the combined total from the two partners which matters – so sometimes you will not try to win a trick but let partner do that, and sometimes you and your partner will be able to combine your plays to win a trick that neither could win without that cooperation. [You might have spotted on the last screen some counters at the bottom right, with tricks for NS and tricks for EW.](#)

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The second difference is there to compensate for the fact that the shuffling and dealing might randomly give one partnership more high cards than the others, and therefore a much better chance of more tricks. The way around that is by the setting of a trick target and a system of score bonuses for achieving targets. It is up to each partnership to decide what that target is, but higher targets – which are of course more difficult to fulfil – will if successful obtain a higher score, so there is a positive incentive to stretch as high as you can safely go in search of that bonus. The choice of target is therefore a balance between rewards for likely success and losses from possible failure. As the partnership with more high cards selects a stretch target, this gives the other partnership who might have quite poor cards a real chance to stop them reaching it. The top bonus goes for contracting for all 13 tricks and taking all 13.

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A third variation from other card games is the concept of a “dummy”. Once the trick target has been set, one player will be designated as Declarer and the partner of that person will be Dummy. The cards held by Dummy are laid out on the table for all to see, and the order of playing them will be designated by the Declarer. So during the play Declarer will have sight and control over 26 cards, and the other 26 cards will be held and controlled by the Defenders. The Defenders will each have sight of their own cards and the 13 cards in dummy, and not be able to see the other 26 cards (although the hope is that the 13 under partner’s control are played in a cooperative manner – after all you are on the same side). This makes the game more interesting because the logic and thinking and problems you face will be different when you are defending and when you are declaring (although they are still related). [Here’s what it looks like from Declarer’s perspective, and from a Defender’s perspective.](#)

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Another variation – although this one occurs in other card games too – is the possibility of a trump suit. We can play a bridge hand without a trump suit (which we call playing in no-trumps) or with any of the four suits as trumps. When a suit is designated as a trump suit it is special – it can win a trick even if it was not the suit of the card first led to this trick. The key rule of following suit still applies, but when the trump suit is led, or when you cannot follow suit, you are able to play a trump and whenever a trump has been played to a trick the winning card is always the highest trump played. If you have a lot of cards in any one suit, then the small cards can turn into winners beating other aces and kings if you designate that suit as trumps. A further variation comes in here too – the scoring gives different rewards for tricks taken in no-trumps, tricks taken with trumps as hearts or spades (the major suits) and for tricks taken with trumps as clubs or diamonds (the minor suits). You take account of these scoring variations in setting the trick target and choosing the trump suit (or lack thereof). [Here we can see a hand played with spades as trumps.](#)

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The final special feature is the concept of bidding. This is the conversation through which bridge players set the trick target, and the concept comes from the days when Auction Bridge preceded the game we know today. The bids are all trick targets, and the bids are ordered in terms of lowest rewards first – so it starts with 1C (“one club”) as the lowest target with clubs as trumps, and the lowest sensible target is seven tricks (as otherwise the other side have done better than you). The bids progress though 1D (“one diamond”) and then 1H, 1S, 1NT (“one no-trumps”) and then onto the two level – but can of course skip forward at any time. You’ll notice that the order of the suit here is ascending alphabetical order, which is easy to remember (if you speak English). As in any auction, each bid must be higher than any previous bid, and once everyone has had a chance to make a final bid, the auction is over, and the last bid becomes the final contract. That contract specifies the trick target for the side who made that bid. The longer your bidding sequence, the higher the final contract will be – you might know better what tricks you can make but if the bidding has gone too high, you will not succeed.

[Here are three examples of bidding;](#) in the first South’s first bid says “I’ve got a fairly balanced hand with above average cards” and North’s bid says “in that case, I think it’s worth a try at making 9 tricks and the bonus there”. In the second example, East’s bid says “I have an above average hand and am wondering if spades would be a good trump suit” and West’s bid says “I think you’re right, but I only have a weak hand myself”. In the third example we see competitive bidding, with the West bid saying “I want to disrupt their conversation, and think that even if they force me to play in this contract, the score (even if negative) will be as good as I can get”.

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Despite the levelling provided by a trick target, with accurate bidding a pair with more high cards will always score better. Duplicate Bridge is a mechanism to balanced that out – taking away that random element and leaving us with a game of skill. The principle in Duplicate is that rather than shuffle and deal repeatedly, you share the hands you have just played with others and they share theirs with you. This is done by placing the cards just held into four slots in a board, in which they can be safely transported to another “table” of four people who can then be presented with exactly the same problems as you had. [Here is what a board looks like.](#) Their results and yours will then be compared. With enough physical boards it is possible for a large number of players to share the same hands; this is the basis of Bridge Tournaments and also enables comparisons to be made between alternative approaches (to the bidding and the play). [Here’s a picture from a large tournament.](#)

THAT’S IT – YOU CAN NOW GET STARTED TO PLAY