

Well, here we are again on a Monday evening ... the first of many when we won't be playing bridge at Summertown ... so:

Let's keep in touch!

We hope that you're all well, managing to keep yourselves fed, not taking any unnecessary risks, and not going totally stir-crazy just yet. If there's any help that we on the Summertown committee can offer – particularly to those of you who live alone – then please do get in touch with us and we'll see what can be done. Our Membership Secretary, Bridget, has offered to co-ordinate any such requests. Several of the committee have also volunteered to phone those of you who we believe to be on their own from time to time, to see if anyone needs help or would just like to have a chat, so don't be surprised if you get a call from one of us. If anyone not on the committee would like to help with this, or could help members in other ways, please do let Bridget know.

To try to keep in touch with one another, and perhaps keep our spirits up a little bit, the committee has decided that we're going to take it in turns to send out a regular "Summertown Bulletin" to you all every Monday. The idea is that it will be related to bridge in some way, and the first one (see below) is about online bridge, in particular starting out with Funbridge.

If you're already using Funbridge, do let me know if you have any good tips that I haven't mentioned here. Or if you're also just starting with it and you're having problems, get in touch and I'll be happy to help if I can.

That's it for now, but there'll be another Summertown Bulletin next Monday, written this time by Steph Bliss. If there's anything in particular you'd like to see in it, do let us know!

Meanwhile let's all do our best to keep safe, healthy, and as happy as we can manage in the circumstances...

Sandra Nicholson and the Summertown Committee

Summertown Monday Bulletin #1: Online bridge and Funbridge

If you haven't already seen the suggestions about online bridge on the EBU website, do go and have a look. There's a pretty good write-up about BBO (Bridge Base Online). Summertown probably doesn't have enough members to set up a dedicated game of our own, as one or two larger clubs are doing: but if enough of us play in the EBU game on a Monday evening, we may well come across one another. We could also think about setting up some sort of online "host" system for anyone wanting to try this who hasn't got a suitable partner. I must admit I haven't yet tried it myself, but Krys and I will be looking at it very soon!

What I have done, over the past few days, is sign up to Funbridge and start finding my way round that, so here are some thoughts and suggestions for anyone else thinking of giving it a go.

How does Funbridge work?

First of all, whereas BBO is designed for pairs playing together, on Funbridge your partner and your opponents are all robots. However, you can still compete against other real people, for example by playing "practice hands" and then seeing how your score compares with lots of others who have played the same hands; or by doing "challenges" where you and one other person play the same five hands, and then compare your results to see who's done best. There are several other alternatives, including "tournaments", but I haven't got that far yet!

One of the best things about it is that (unlike a real game) you always have time to stop and think about each hand. Also, after you've played a hand you can immediately replay it to see if a different approach would have worked better; or, you can look at how other people bid and played the same hand.

It also has a very clear layout that makes it easier to use than some of the alternatives.

How do I get Funbridge? And is it expensive?

The first thing you need to do is search for "Funbridge free trial" and then download the app (or program, on a desktop or laptop). You may get offered the opportunity to play online without downloading, but it's better to download the free trial because this gives you 100 free boards to play, whereas the online version only gave me 15. Don't worry too much though, because it's really not expensive to sign up. The exact price depends on how far in advance you want to pay, but it will never be more than the cost of playing once a week at the club.

What do I have to do to start playing on Funbridge?

You'll be asked to register and choose an online name – which could be your real name, but most people seem to choose a nickname. Then you have to choose a bidding system. Acol is available, and I'd recommend starting with the Intermediate level, which includes weak twos and a weak no trump. You'll be able to customise this later, if you want.

Now just dive in and give it a try. The best way to start is to take the option for "Get started/Practise" and then choose "Practice deals". Picking "Play – MP" will then bring up your first hand, which you'll be playing duplicate style.

How do I bid and play a hand?

It's fairly obvious how to choose your bids, but before you click on a bid, always hover over it and look at the explanation given – sometimes it doesn't seem to be Acol at all! The same applies to all the other bids round the table, particularly your partner's. Also, your robot opponents are always going to be playing a strong NT system.

When the bidding has finished, the other hands appear round the table, and it's time for the opening lead. If your side has won the contract, you will always be declarer, even if this means that you change hands with your partner. This can be a little bit disorientating at first, but you quickly get used to it. The program is biased to give N/S more points, so you'll find that you're actually declarer most of the time.

To play a card, you click on the suit you want to play. All the cards in that suit are displayed and you then choose the one you want. If you change your mind about the suit (e.g. when discarding), you can just click anywhere else in the screen to see the full hand again. At the end of each trick, the screen gathers up the cards that have been played and they magically disappear – but if you leave the right-hand side panel open, you can always see the most recent trick, as well as all the bidding.

Towards the end of the hand, you can save time by claiming. The system will always check your claim and sometimes may refuse it, particularly if you haven't finished drawing trumps.

Anything else I should know?

When you've played a few hands, you can try altering the settings (the little toolkit that appears in the side panel when you have a deal open) – for instance, you can automatically play singletons, if you prefer. Then you can go on to try a challenge, or perhaps think about joining one of the EBU daily tournaments, for which there's a small extra charge.

Finally, as you can imagine, the robots usually play a pretty mean game, but they can't "see" hidden cards and they seem to have some sort of built-in error factor that pops up sometimes (just like your real partner, in fact!), so they won't always take all the tricks they could do. Getting one over on them is particularly satisfying, and I can already see that the whole thing is going to be quite addictive...

So that's as far as I've got for now. At first it all seemed very unnatural and I had quite a few bad results because I was concentrating on the program rather than the cards. After only a few days, though, it's getting much easier, and now I'm just making the mistakes I would always have made!

Sandra Nicholson
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