



Cover image: Bridge players' orientation diagram.

This morning I wrote an e-mail to my local Linux User Group, asking for help in figuring out what's wrong with my laptop fan (which whirls madly most of the time and every now and then just stops, oblivious to the rising heat). I was afraid my newbie request would be met with scorn and mockery, but instead I got several very helpful replies.

In what I believed to be the last mail in the thread, I thanked everyone, even though no suggestion had worked. But the list moderator replied once more saying no need to thank us, this is what user groups are for. "Otherwise, we'd have founded a Bridge club or something."

Of course, he meant it as a joke. What he didn't know was that — as someone who was in a Bridge club for a while in my 20s — I had been the butt of countless similar jokes. Another thing he didn't know is what a Bridge club is, or should be, all about.

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Bridge is a card game played by two teams of two people. It has been immensely popular throughout the 20th century, even though its following is now declining. It is widely considered to be the most difficult of all card games.

Bridge was invented by billionaire Harold Stirling Vanderbilt during a yacht trip in 1925. He and his friends were bored playing the era's main pastime, Whist, and decided to make it more complex. They succeeded, to such an extent that by the 1930s Bridge was played all over the world.

The game's success hinged on several factors. It poses an immensely complex computational challenge; by minimizing the role of luck in determining a game's outcome, it encourages an intellectually competitive and ambitious play. Moreover, Bridge is played in teams of two, and the communication and understanding between teammates is often as crucial to winning as a mastery of rules and mathematical subtleties. This gives the game a deeply human, feel-it-in-your-guts dimension that has to do with partnership and mutual understanding, team spirit, friendship, even love.

Another reason Bridge has proved so popular is that it is an extremely cheap form of entertainment. It offers possibly the single largest amount of potential game-hours (considering all possible card deals) with the extremely modest initial investment of a single deck of cards.

The game's upper-class origins and allure notwithstanding, it is the middle and lower class who decreed its popularity. Bridge takes years to learn, which made it an appealing investment for the massive free time people suddenly found themselves with after the crisis of 1929. They didn't even need a deck: contrary to Poker, which can only be played in person, Bridge can also be played in the mind, just like chess. A match can be replayed on paper, a puzzle pondered for hours. Papers all over the world used to syndicate such puzzles daily. Some still do.

The game's ambitious class structure has had some unexpected consequences. For instance: it's not difficult to imagine why the world's top Bridge tournament, informally known as the Bermuda Bowl, has been won most often by the U.S. team (16 times out of 40). It's more surprising to realize that the second likeliest winner, 13 times out of 40, has been Italy.

The standard explanation for the game's success in Italy was that it was taught by U.S. soldiers stationed there during and after the Second World War, and that the need for cheap entertainment helped it gain traction in the context of European postwar austerity in the 1940s, much as it did in Depression-era America a decade or so before. I heard this explanation often at home (both my parents and the three grandparents I knew were avid players), usually supplemented with another detail. Italy not only was the world's Bridge champion, it also had the world's strongest Communist party in a democracy. (In the 1960s and 1970s, the U.S. team wasn't as strong as it later would be; meanwhile, Italy was the world Bridge superpower, winning every Bermuda Bowl between 1957 and 1970.)

These two factors went hand in hand, according to family lore, for the same reason the Soviet Union was the undisputed chess champion at the time: capitalist countries could excel at stuff you needed money for — going to the moon, shooting blockbuster movies, etc.; but when it was just about people's brains, as was the case in chess or Bridge — you saw the effect of a strong party.

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As a kid, I learned a brutally oversimplified version of the rules of Bridge by watching my parents and grandparents play with their friends from the Rome-Balduina Communist Party Circle. But I never actually played it myself until one August about ten years ago, when I attended a summer school in formal logics held by a consortium of Italian universities in a splendid villa on Lake Garda.

The villa belonged to a family of the Italian aristocracy who had given it to Mussolini as an ingratiating present. They had gotten it back during postwar restitutions, with the exhortation to find a more worthy recipient this time; so they donated it to a nonprofit organization who leased it out for cultural events. In its grand ballroom, Pasolini filmed the torture scenes for his movie *Salò*. In its waterfront dining room, we were lectured on category theory and transfinite induction. And on the porch, we would play games.

The attendants at the school were mostly math or computer science students; my small group of philosophy majors was usually shunned or frowned upon as being made up of somewhat dumb, over-emphatic impostors. The one time we all really fit together was at night, when we would drink spritz and play card games like, well, students from a formal logics school on class break.

After a while we grew tired of the usual games, and I explained what little I knew of Bridge to the group of friends I was playing with. They seemed interested. We Googled a drastically basic set of rules, and mostly ignored them while making up our way through the first games. Still, we were hooked. Bridge was more complex and mathematically rich than Poker; more strategic than chess; more psychologically involving than Risk; brutally competitive and endlessly diverse.

Really?

Yes. We were unable to accept that this was what our grandmothers had been playing all along. What puzzled and bewildered us was how such a fantastically complex, arduous, and viciously competitive game could come to be seen as an old people's pastime.

My other, non-summer-school friends were puzzled or bewildered, too, when in September I told them I had enrolled in a Bridge school. They thought I should get a life and start doing more drugs. I tried to dispel their puzzlement. Bridge was incredibly challenging and complex; it was much closer to chess than to any other card game, including Poker.

“But then, why do only old people play it?”

I couldn’t really answer that question. But if nobody but old people played tennis, I would say, this wouldn’t make tennis an old people’s game! Actually, they’d probably be playing it poorly. Imagine what guys our age could do on that court.

My friends usually rejected the comparison.

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Picture some future in which nobody plays tennis. Or, rather, picture a future in which nobody learns tennis anymore.

It isn’t that unrealistic. Courts take up a lot of space, which over time will become more and more valuable. The equipment and rental is more expensive than what’s needed to play basketball, swim, or jog. Also, the amount of training required to make someone into a passable player will be increasingly difficult to fit into the ever fuller schedules of kids, adolescents, and people in their 20s and 30s. 20 years ago, an adolescent could get away with wasting two afternoons a week, but not anymore.

Nobody will play tennis except the people who got used to playing it in their youth, in the distant 2000s and 1990s. They’ll keep on doing it well into old age, whether out of passion or habit or to stay healthy. They’ll play more and more poorly with age. Clubs will dwindle and shrink as players gradually pass away. Tournaments will get shorter over time. Every now and then, younger players might join — players in their 50s who remember their parents teaching them tennis when they were kids. Even younger people might try it, out of curiosity, or nostalgia, or just because.

These college-aged players will herald the pros of tennis among their

peers: it's fun! It's strategic and a great team-building experience! It's so good for your health! They'll be likely to elicit skepticism and laughter. You can get those things from other sports, which are less time-consuming and less expensive and more in vogue. Besides, what sort of creep enjoys spending time with people thrice their age?

You might retort that the comparison doesn't hold because tennis is a sport while Bridge is a game. Well.

The Olympics have a very inclusive understanding of the notion of "sport," covering disciplines that require little or no physical prowess such as shooting. The only thing I can see that differentiates such a notion from that of a game is that luck plays no role in determining a sport's outcome, whereas games can minimize the role of luck but can never rule it out completely. (This isn't strictly true. One might argue that, say, England would be favored over Chile if a soccer match among them were to be scheduled for a rainy day. The former's players would be more used to the field's condition. We might retort this isn't luck but rather happenstance, but there would be some hair-splitting involved. Anyway: let's say luck plays a negligible role.)

Under this definition, "games" such as Chess or Go would qualify as sports, since they leave absolutely no room for luck. Actually, for this reason they have a category by themselves: mind sports. Bridge is the only card game to qualify as a mind sport. (Many video games would fit, too.) Usually, card games are determined to a certain extent by the luck of the draw. The extent varies, and as luck recedes, the space it vacates is filled by talent: more of it is involved in Rummy than in Uno, for example.

The card game that goes to the greatest length in minimizing the role of luck is probably some variant of Poker. Even at Poker, though, a beginner who happens to be systematically dealt extraordinary cards will beat the most hardened pro. The pro might resist — always reading her opponent's hand, never bidding, not even once; still, one ante chip at a time, her money would ooze towards the lucky beginner even in the event they never actually went beyond the opening bet.

Nothing similar can happen in Bridge.

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A match of Bridge is divided into two parts, the bidding and the game. It's easier to explain them backwards.

The game is very similar to Hearts as it used to be included in Microsoft Windows, but the trump suit can change. Each player has 13 cards. One of them leads by laying a card face up; the others, in turn, do the same. They must follow suit if they have any cards in that suit, otherwise, they can play any one card.

Once each player has uncovered a card, a point ("trick") goes to the player who laid the highest trump card. In case no trump cards have been played, the trick goes to the player who laid the highest card in the leading suit. The four cards are then set aside face down and the player who scored the trick leads a new one.

In Hearts, a game goes to the team who scored the most tricks—that is, since each player has 13 cards, to the team that scores at least seven. In Bridge, instead, it goes to the team that makes its contract, which is what the bidding is about.

Bidding happens when players already have their cards but before they start playing. They analyze them to establish the amount of tricks they will make in the following game, given a certain trump suit. Then they start an auction with their opponents, about who feels confident to score the most tricks with their current hands. The top bidder (that is, the team that commits itself to scoring the most tricks) gets to name the trump suit and then has to respect that contract.

The bidding is where Bridge becomes Bridge, because points in the game are assigned not based on how many tricks a team scores, but rather on whether they *\*respect their contract\**—which is why it's also known as "Contract Bridge."

Suppose you have a very strong hand and feel confident you can make all 13 tricks with it, but then—out of a mistake in evaluation, poor play, or reckless optimism—ultimately only score 12. In Hearts, you would have



won by a large margin: if you make 12 tricks, your opponents only make 1! In Bridge, you actually lose, since you haven't respected your contract. Hence the outcome of a match depends not on the cards you are dealt, but on how good you are at understanding them (Is my ♠ suit solid enough) and playing them (Are there still ♣s around, or are mine the last ones?). Luck is thereby completely factored out.

This makes Bridge a game of extreme rational analysis. Given any hand and any contract, there's a way to evaluate its chances of being fulfilled, and the best procedure to do so.

The evaluation is objective and has to do with the statistics of distribution. If I have 5 ♠s and my partner 4, the remaining 4 are likelier to be split 3/1 than 2/2 among my opponents (49% vs. 40%). If my team is missing the King of ♠s there is thus a 6% chance that it is that single card on either side. If my contract depends on capturing that King with my Ace, I have to plan strategies to account for the 94% chance of finding it accompanied by one or two other cards; an impasse has 50% chance of working, an expasse 25%, a squeeze from 1% to 100% depending on how proficient you are at keeping track of cards.

This is an extremely simplified example of 1/13th of the reasoning involved in the 30 or so seconds before playing begins. Provided a player spends those 30 seconds accounting for all variables, a game's outcome can be predicted with certainty or at least on a probabilistic scale, hinging on the distribution of a certain suit among the opponents, or on who among them received a specific card, or on combinations of such factors. Before even laying a card on the table, you should be able to say with confidence that, all things considered, you have x% chance of making your contract. All the things to consider are the possible card splits among the three hands a player doesn't see, which are a little more than eighty million billion.

(For the sake of comparison: a player of chess evaluating every possible scenario in the game seven moves ahead would have to deal with a mere ten million possibilities.)

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If in most cases there can be an objectively best way to play, it means all other ways are objectively wrong. Come to think of it, this is quite weird. It is difficult to imagine a provably wrong Poker play. One can construe a card combination that has the absolute guarantee of winning (and that hence could be wasted), but it would involve extremely unlikely scenarios of discarding a whole hand and drafting a stronger one. In most cases, you can certainly have a \*belief,\* of variable strength and based on factors as diverse as your cards and the look on your opponents' faces; but even in those cases, you can never rule out the possibility that that look is there to fool you. If a player decides to scrap it — “I saw in her face she could beat my flush” — you can blame his poor intuition or lack of guts, but you can't say he was stupid.

On the other end of the spectrum, a chess move — at a decent level of proficiency — can be proven good or bad only by a scarily complex set of inferences and tree-branch diagrams. This is not what happens in the head of champions, who most often seek general shapes and patterns on the board that they can subsume under a previously known strategy, rather than analyze every possible move from scratch. (A fact that has recently been confirmed by eye-movement analysis.) In chess, too, knowledge of the opponent's psychology and strategical preferences is of invaluable help (at least to those who lack a computer's brute-force case-by-case analytic power).

Bridge lies in-between.

The calculations are much easier to master than chess, since it's mostly about keeping track of your opponents' 26 cards, and their bidding usually provides clues as to who's got the guns. Also, since all cards are in someone's hand, your inferences have a degree of certainty that Poker lacks.

And yet those calculations are often still too complex for even the hardest of pros to take every possibility into account. If you lack a King in ♦s, should you attempt a 22% expasse on East? ... or bet on its being singleton and slam your Ace — which only has a 12% chance of success ... but would then leave you with that extra access to the dummy hand which gives you a 75% chance of promoting the fifth ♣ ... but of course this assumes both ♥s and ♣s are not 5/0, which has a 89% chance of

happening but seems at odds with West's Double over your Stayman conventional bid ... and maybe he just has a much likelier 4/1?

The previous paragraph is largely fictional, since in fact the above reasoning is not complex at all. Anyone even slightly versed in Bridge would realize this puzzle has been designed by a beginner such as myself who cannot even imagine what a *\*really\** complex situation is. I hope I conveyed the gist of it, though. My dad says even a mule would promote the fifth ♣.

So what happens is this: in most cases players have a fairly good perception of the odds they are facing. But these odds are calculated assuming (a) no extremely improbable distribution and (b) perfect play from your opponents. Since (a) is logically possible and (b) humanly common, a game of Bridge is like betting on a horse race in which you can access every bit of information in the universe but there's a meteor shower going on. It's about computing an enormous lot of facts and trusting your analysis but hoping no skyward chunk of rock hits your guy, while knowing that if it does, you should have known.

Also, it's a game in which you obsessively rethink your every move and play while your opponents, your partner, or your dad keeps reminding you how wrong you were. And they can prove it.

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Games are thrilling because of what you don't know, and they are interesting because of what you do know. You have to have control over the outcome (otherwise it's just luck), but you need for this control to have bounds (otherwise it's just algebra).

This overlaps with the sport/game distinction if we consider that in games, the bounds to control are determined by randomness (dice, draws, etc.); in sports, they are determined by your opponents' control. This, also, would mark chess as a sport. What about running, though? You don't really have opponents; you might as well run on your own and check your time against everyone else's. Well, we do recognize a difference between running and volleyball. The former is also called a discipline, which I find to

be a very nice word. If Bridge were all about testing the limits of one's computational power, as I just described it, it would be a discipline. Also, it would be very boring.<sup>1</sup>

But it is not. Also, it is neither a game nor a sport according to our previous description. As far as I know, Bridge is the only activity in which the bounds to control lie not in luck (as in Risk) or in your opponent (as in Go and MMA), but are instead hard-wired as a layer of deliberate vagueness into another part of the game. This is the bidding.

Bidding happens when players already have their cards but before they start playing. They analyze them to establish the amount of tricks they will make in the following game, given a certain trump suit. Then they start an auction with their opponents, about who feels confident to score the most tricks with their current hands. Yes, you've already read this, but it's really important so I thought I'd write it twice.

During the bidding, players take turns in saying things like "1 ♣" and "5 ♠s," referring to the amount of tricks they aim to make. It's an auction: the number can only go up, and when nobody raises anymore, a contract is settled and the actual game begins. The minimum contract is for 7 tricks, as this implies your opponents will be making the remaining 6. Contracts are thus conventionally counted from this "base" of 6, so a declaration of "4 ♦s" will commit the bidder to make 10 tricks with ♦s as a trump. This extremely logical yet perversely counterintuitive convention is just the very, very beginning.

In order to commit yourself and your partner to a certain number of tricks, you should know something about their hand; but the only way you have of communicating is by raising the bid, i.e. by committing yourself and your partner to a certain amount of tricks. This is why the bidding is carried out in "systems"—conventional schemes that assign specific, contextual meanings to certain bids. Most bids are never meant as possible contracts, but are just used to share sometimes very specific information about your hand in extremely succinct terms.

For instance, in the system I played with my father, a first round declaration of "3 ♣s" by one of us said nothing about ♣s, but rather

communicated that I had an extremely weak hand with no more than 4 cards in both ♥s and ♠s. On the other hand, if I bid “3 ♣s” in reply to an opening such as “1 ♥s,” according to our code it would mean I had an extremely strong hand with at least 2 ♥s and either an ace or no cards at all in the suit of ♣s. If I bid “3 ♣s” in reply to a “1 ♣s” opening it would mean I had a lot of ♣s.

(This is not a secret language: players can always ask their opponents what their conventions mean, and they must be answered adequately. But these conventions are typically so complex and idiosyncratic that it would take years to master the subtleties of any one of them—and even longer to understand precisely how your partner uses them.)

Most systems try to take into account all possible hands and develop ways of describing them. This can get very tricky, beyond the “I have a lot of ♦s” stage. What if you need to know if your partner has the King of ♠s, specifically—can you ask? What if you want a specific bid to be declared by your partner, because for complex reasons to do with playing order, you might want them to name the final contract instead of saying it yourself—can you make them know?

Yes, but again it’s incredibly complex. There are conventions to handle such situations. The ones above, among the easiest, are called “Stayman” and “Transfers,” respectively, but there are dozens more. And then there are the thousands of cases in which no specific convention has been agreed upon, because they are too rare or weird, and you have to make one up on the go and pray your partner knows you well enough to understand what you’re saying.

If you consider a system as a formal language, this would be a language with 38 possible statements, daunting purpose is to unequivocally describe one in six hundred billion possible hands to someone with their eyes closed.

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If the gameplay of Bridge pretty much boils down to statistics and guts (and hence gives the bettor’s thrill of checking if your analysis is correct), the bidding amounts to a kind of 18th-century courtship. A set of very

precise questions (“Does she want to sleep with me?” “Does he have that Ace I miss?”) is addressed with a deliberately ambiguous conventional language (“She dropped her napkin ... ” “He redoubled East’s double ... ” ... this must mean something!). This makes things uncertain, and uncertainty makes them fun.

It also makes having an understanding with your partner crucial. On the one hand, this implies a lot of studying. In the space I’ve devoted until now to giving an extremely basic understanding of the mechanics of Bridge (without mentioning even half of the rules and nothing at all on scoring and tournaments), the rules of most games ever invented could be explained in full, twice. The learning curve of Bridge thus resembles a line whose slant is so imperceptible it might as well be horizontal. Unless you are devoting a disproportionate amount of time to it, you might take a few months to begin to grasp what is going on around you, a year to become an acceptable beginner, and a decade to become an expert. By comparison, the most difficult video games on the market usually have a playing life of a few hundred hours. On the other hand, this implies you need to have a partner and get to know him/her extremely well.

The bidding is a matter of precision: to make the most points, one needs to be able to understand what’s in a partner’s hand. Conventional language can help only up to a point; after that, most of the work involved comes down to guessing what your partner meant exactly rather than generically. Here returns all the ambiguity and subtlety and hope and guts and guesswork lost in the statistics. This is one of the reasons why computers—by now proven as undisputed champions at both Chess and Poker—are still trailing in Bridge. It’s not that they haven’t tried. One of the world’s most enthusiastic Bridge sponsors is Bill Gates, who often plays with Warren Buffett. Computers have, understandably, proven better than humans at analyzing a hand and, more recently, at playing it.

But analysis and play are, respectively, the first and third stages in the game; the link among them, bidding, is the stage in which algorithms (at least non-self-teaching ones) work only up to a point. On most hands, a computer can bid as well as anyone who’s read a Bridge textbook, or several dozen. But the subtlest cases are precisely the ones in which there’s no set convention to follow, because the situation one needs to

describe is extremely rare. Hence, more often than not, you have to come up with a previously undiscussed artificial meaning for a bid and hope your partner knows you well enough to understand what you meant, even though that wasn't already agreed upon.<sup>2</sup>

You interpret a bid according to what you know of your partner (overconfident, timid, unlikely to second unless prodded); a very good understanding is an incredible strength and a source of pride and connection (“How could you know I had that additional ♠?” “I felt you wouldn’t have switched to ♣s otherwise.” “But our system...” “This is not about our system; it’s about you.”)

The obverse is also true, and since Bridge was born, there has been a constant, if now faltering stream of Bridge-related murders involving bidding misunderstandings.

The most famous took place in Kansas City, two weeks before the 1929 Wall Street crash. Myrtle Bennett shot her husband John after a bidding session in which he proved himself, in her words, “a bum player.” He took offense and left the table and was dead shortly thereafter.

The case got a lot of publicity due to the couple’s relative wealth and because Bridge—which had been invented a few years earlier—was just starting to gain the immense popularity it would enjoy over the course of the next half century. This popularity would be cemented by the Depression, during which the cheap and immersive diversion Bridge has to offer would be particularly appreciated by people suddenly burdened with a lot of free time.

But I’m digressing. The case ended in an acquittal; some believe that Myrtle’s family pulled strings, or that the Kansas City upper-class community didn’t feel prison time would add anything to the ignominy that had just fallen upon one of their own. Newspapers at the time speculated that John’s very bad Bridge had somehow convinced the jury he had it coming. After the acquittal, the prosecutor’s assistant summed it up to the Kansas City Star: “It looks like it’s open season on husbands.”

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There is a whole literary genre of Bridge-partner anecdotes and quotes. Many involve murders, or rich people. Men such as Warren Buffett and Bill Gates have admitted that they would endure life in prison quite merrily if they could have a good Bridge partner and some opponents to play against. John McCain played Bridge all day long during his time as a PoW in Vietnam.

There was a famous daily game of Bridge held in the 1990s in the death row at San Quentin prison in California. Its players were known in the papers as the Freeway Killer, the Sunset-Strip Killer, the Scorecard Killer (who also had been briefly known as the Freeway Killer himself) and one, Lawrence Bittaker, who was simply dubbed “Pliers.” Their combined confirmed kills were 84, but the Scorecard Killer was accused of 20 more. The Freeway Killer “had a beef with the Sunset-Strip Killer and with the Scorecard Killer,” so he usually ended up playing with Pliers even though he “was often the butt of Pliers’ jokes,” according to a *Vanity Fair* reporter. His IQ was the lowest of the bunch. The games stopped with his execution by lethal injection in 1996.

The atmosphere at San Quentin must have been a bit different from what my friends and I found in the Bridge club we frequented for a full year (myself) or two (them). Instead, the place was exactly as my Linux admin imagined it would be: a set of rooms in a renovated palazzo with shiny marble floors, very expensive finger food and nobody under 60 in sight. Women wore pearls.

We enrolled for a course and met there every week, sometimes twice a week for the tournaments. The other players’ reactions to our presence there were puzzled to begin with, then settled into a kind of entertained yet diffident acceptance. Of course it was great that young people were interested in the game—but since we were the only ones, didn’t that make us a bit weird?

Our opponents would ask us our age and proceed to compare it to that of their grandchildren, who were usually about our age (early 20s) or somewhat older. “Anna/Giulia/Matteo would never play Bridge, though,” they would then comment. Then nobody would speak for a while. “Three ♠s.”



As players, too, we were in an odd position. We initially knew much less than everyone in our class, which was surprising, since it was aimed at absolute beginners. But our learning curve was much steeper, and a few months into the course we had climbed up to the top in the mock class-only tournaments we ran every now and then. Many of our classmates, we later discovered, had been regulars at the absolute beginners course for several years. They would gradually absorb a trickle of notions without ever mastering them enough to graduate to the next level—which, too, was filled for a good part with elderly beginners who enjoyed playing but had given up on (or had better things to do than) improving their game.

Not that we were faring much better. We knew that, outside the sandbox, we would be considered as barely able to hold our hand together. On a couple occasions we ventured at a “general beginners” tournament but never went beyond the lowest echelons. New opponents we’d meet would be thrilled before the start of each game, afraid our youth would mean more attention and better memory, and hence easy victory. However, our blatant mistakes would not startle them that much but rather subtly reassure them. Of course we can’t play: we’re way too young.

There is a way (aside from the obvious one) in which this is true. As in Chess, the extraordinary computational complexity required by a great many situations in Bridge can be worked around by experience and trained reflexes. Some technically arduous play strategies, if repeated often enough, will come automatically to a player’s mind upon seeing a certain combination of cards.

The tricky part is the “often enough.” I have seen several different estimates (in terms of number of games, or years, or hours) of the experience required to make an average human being “good” at Bridge, and they always involved a few years’ worth of playing once a week. This is ultimately what broke the deal for me. After a year, I felt my progress was too slow and frustrating, so I quit. Of my three original companions, one had already done so, and another would in a couple of years; the fourth (the only woman) has gone on to become a professional teacher and plays on the Scottish National Team.

This could be seen as proof of the boys' fickleness and lack of devotion, which it most certainly is. It is also an illustration of the problem with the game.

Bridge is probably the hardest thing I've ever done for fun. It IS a lot of fun, at least if you have the right kind of mental structure (if you find chess, or topology, fun; I do). It is immersive and addictive and offers endless opportunities for speculation and reflection. But I suspect its entry price isn't merely high; it's unrealistically so. We are increasingly impatient with our entertainment. Serials have recaps at the beginning of every episode so viewers don't have to have seen them all in order to enjoy the next one. Action movies get shorter every year. Video games aim at a frictionless user experience, an interface so intuitive that it requires no learning whatsoever. Long novels are expected to pack an extraordinary amount of action and intensity in order to justify the relevant time investment they command. As a novelist, I'm often asked how I can expect someone to spend maybe ten hours of their life on my work, when so much more interesting stuff could be experienced over the same time online. I don't know. Bridge takes two years.

Of course, there are other leisure activities that take an extremely long time to learn, like tennis and sailing. But these are fun and beneficial even while learning, if maybe less so. Tennis class is exercise, and a game; sailing school involves, well, being on lakes and making out with girls from Rome. Bridge class involves memorizing statistics.

Perhaps a better comparison would be learning a language: that, too, is a quite boring and painstaking process, and one in which the goal doesn't come in parcels. For several months, your progress is useless outside of the classroom, and only after a longish period will you be able to carry out a basic conversation in your awkward Arabic or French. But by then you will have \*mastered\* Arabic or French, which opens up a whole new culture to discover, and is something you can boast about with your friends and an asset for your resume. Even if you don't know any other language, you still know how learning one would benefit you.

On the other hand, without an extremely long and detailed introduction, one can't even begin to grasp what Bridge is about, why it's fun and

addictive, why it has nothing to do with any other card game (this text, running at some 6,000 words by now, has barely offered the most cursory introduction). But this is precisely what one would need to find the motivation to study for a few months just to get started. Hence, one doesn't.

A century ago, there were far fewer sources of free entertainment, and those, too, were on the average much more laborious. Growing up surrounded by people playing Bridge meant you knew how fascinating and challenging the game could be. Billionaires played it on their yachts! Serial killers, too! Worker-heroes beat them! Wives shot their husbands over it! The motivation for studying was wanting in on the fun. Today, what little is perceived of Bridge among those who don't know it is likely to be a reason to avoid it rather than the opposite; the same critical-mass effect that made its fortune is driving people away.

Probably no pastime this intense can ever become truly extinct — especially not if it's on the Internet. Indeed, it does seem that some kind of revival of Bridge is taking place now that anyone, anywhere, can always find people online to play with. But the numbers are still nowhere near what they were in the 1940s, when Bridge was played in half of American households. It's an estimated 8% now, a figure that is likely to keep shrinking down to the niche it will eventually become. Poker has replaced it as the spectacular card game — the bigger role assigned to luck and the notably lesser degree of complication notwithstanding, or maybe because of them. Chess has inherited its intellectual prestige, that "mind-sport" aura. Bridge is left with the dubious trophy of being possibly the hardest form of entertainment ever invented, an accolade that clearly shows it to belong to another era.

I started playing Bridge in the summer of 2006, when, In Italy at least, Facebook didn't exist.

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1. Not necessarily. This is Edgar Allan Poe on Whist, which is just that — bridge without bidding: “Whist has long been known for its influence upon what is termed the calculating power; and men of the highest order of intellect have been known to take an apparently unaccountable delight in it, while eschewing chess as frivolous. (...) Beyond doubt there is nothing of a similar nature so greatly tasking the faculty of analysis. The best chess-player in Christendom may be little more than the best player of chess; but proficiency in Whist implies capacity for success in all these more important undertakings where mind struggles with mind.”

2. David Lewis, a philosopher whom regular readers of *Bulletins* might remember for his several proofs of the existence of God (see: “Truths out of Thin Air,” [www.servinglibrary.org](http://www.servinglibrary.org)) had done graduate work on conventions people did not agree upon. He didn’t consider Bridge — not that I know of, at least; but spent some time interviewing strangers as to, for instance, where they would go if they knew they had to meet someone in NYC at a specific time tomorrow, but hadn’t agreed where (winner: the information booth at Grand Central), or the opposite (12:00). The topic of unagreed-upon-convention isn’t abstruse and removed from actual life as it might seem. In Lewis’s opinion, language developed just that way.