



EUROPEAN BRIDGE LEAGUE

Bridge and Internet

by Panos Gerontopoulos

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INTERNET entered our lives less than 20 years ago, and since then we have all noticed a substantial difference. Things are simply not the same. We all have examples of how Internet has improved our lives by opening up new possibilities. In many fields, what was then difficult, even impossible, is a routine matter today. So, the advent of Internet was definitely a positive development. However, nothing in this world is one-sided. Even the greatest achievement carries some negative implications. Internet is no exception.

What about bridge? How has Internet influenced our game? Sure enough, there were positive as well as negative implications – but what has been the overall influence? What are the positive implications and how can we take advantage of them? What are the negative implications and how can we face them? This is the objective of this presentation.

1. Advantages of Internet and how can Bridge use them

a. Communication

The need for good communication has always been one of the most important aspects in almost all human activities, whether in business, civil and military organization or social life. With electronic mail (e-mail) which may include voice and image transmission, and file transfers, Internet brought about a great improvement over *direct* communication, previously dominated by the mail, telephone, (telex) and fax. It has also improved *indirect* communication with the various websites, where previously we had available printed media mostly.

b. Information

Internet has brought us close to an amazing amount of information. Probably, we had never thought that we could have access to so much information from the comfort of our own environment. Before, one had to visit a big library to have a chance of locating what he was looking for. Not anymore!

We should not overlook that it is not only how much information is readily available to the Internet user, but also that he is able to search this information with key words, and single out what he is looking for with incredible flexibility and speed.

c. **Effective administration**

Administering an organization has never been easier before the advent of Internet! Bridge Federations, clubs, etc., can now communicate with their members, post information about their tournaments, get entries, publish results, rankings and Master Points lists, etc. – almost instantly, and practically without cost (just compare with the mail costs of the past!)

d. **Broadcasting Bridge**

In football, it is important to score, of course, but what excites people is to see *how* a goal was scored. In Bridge, what matters is which card a player played; how he played does not matter (normally!) Accordingly, the image is important in football, which is a sport tailor made for television; whereas, in bridge, we care about the information (data), which makes bridge a sport tailor made for Internet. Indeed, with Internet, bridge can now reach the masses instantly.

e. **Online Play**

The culmination of Internet for bridge is online play. Today, people are able to play bridge without moving from the comfort of their homes, at any time of the day or night. They can play with or against some of the world's top players; or at least they can watch them play in real time. Bridge partners who are far away from each other can practice thanks to online bridge. Handicapped people are presented with 'unheard of' possibilities. And even sociality between bridge players is well served with the opportunity they have to chat with each other over Internet.

f. **Exposure**

Through Internet, Bridge can reach millions of people who surf Internet looking for something new which they may have defined in their minds – or not. The exposure to the outside world is enormous! Today, there is virtually no activity, business or idea that is not projected through various websites. That is where sponsors are also looking.

2. Disadvantages of Internet and how can Bridge face them

a. **Time**

The wealth and great variety of Internet makes it necessarily very much time-consuming. Whether for good or for bad, people spend time on Internet; time which, of course, they could not and did not spend in this way before the advent of Internet. As the day has 24 hours for all people, when a certain activity takes up some of this time, there is less time left for other activities – like bridge.

b. **Easy but Unworthy Solution**

It sounds quite easy to stay at home and enjoy a game of bridge, just the way you like it, without leaving the comfort of your own environment. Or so it seems, because it is not the same! There are many things missing from online bridge. The most important is *security* which makes it impossible to play anything further than a friendly game with little at stake; you can never know who is really seated opposite you, who are the actual opponents, if they are being advised by somebody else, or if they are able to see each other's cards. But security is not the only consideration. *Psychology* is another factor of the game that is severely restricted, if not totally eliminated, in online bridge. What happened to 'table presence'? Let alone that many people believe that it is not just the same as holding 13 cards in your own hand...

c. Internet Games

This is a main obstacle in the promotion of bridge, especially among young people, many of which spend endless hours on Internet games. We should not underestimate this addiction of the young people, first because bridge is addictive too and secondly because, as time passes, what was once a problem concerning very young people, is now extending to older ages too! You may be surprised to find out how many ex-youngsters continue to play such games in their 30s!

What is so attractive in these games? How can a 'video' game be compared with bridge and prevail? It is worth examining these questions in some depth.

Once upon a time, the only universal *inexhaustible* games were chess and bridge. Such a game is so complicated that no player can claim to have grasped it in one life time and thus lose interest in this game due to lack of further challenge. The development of electronic technology led to the introduction of 'video' games, i.e. games with image and graphics, usually projected on a TV set. The clumsy artificial graphics and primitive sound of these early games soon gave way to much more sophisticated and realistic creations, while computing power allowed the scenarios of the games to deepen. What were once innocent little games for children have now developed into threatening computer games, fully comparable with chess and bridge (see details in *Appendix I*). Internet brought about a further improvement to computer games, which could now be played against real opponents through the network, instead of exclusively against the computer.

Internet games constitute a 'clear and present' danger to bridge today, competing with bridge as *inexhaustible* games, and overtaking it in realism and, therefore, generation of interest.

d. Sociality

One of the most vulnerable points of Internet due to the addiction it causes to many people, is the resulting social isolation. At the end of the 20th century, a scientific study at the University of Pittsburgh showed that it can even cause depression! That study surprised many people at the time (including the scientists who carried it out!); however, many studies of the past decade have confirmed its findings. (See *Appendix II*).

Even though, in the first place, Internet appeared to be social as it connected people, sometimes under adverse conditions, in reality it provides an insufficient contact which cannot be a substitute for real contact. We communicate through Internet with data, at best with sound and vision, but these are not enough. Before Internet, other revolutionary advances also provided inadequate solutions to the problem of sociality: the telephone (two-way sound only), the television (one-way image and sound only), etc. Internet has certainly improved the situation, and fiber optics will soon allow much improved communication (better two-way image and sound; still not as good as real). However, the transmission of all senses is still a long way away; while it is still not clear if we react to various situations exclusively through these senses.

Bridge is fortunate to be a particularly social game. You cannot play bridge alone, while success at the table presupposes good communication and cooperation with your partner. A good player is in contact with the opponents too, as he is interested in reading their thoughts for whatever they do. Very important in a championship is what we call 'team spirit'. Generally speaking, all these are the results of sociality at bridge – a feature which fully characterizes the game.

3. Conclusions

a. Should we worry?

The initial spread of Internet and its acceptance by the home user brought about much worry in bridge administrative circles. Following the concern of some top administrators, an ad hoc Committee was formed within the WBF in 1998, to study the possible implications on live bridge. The conclusion was that *Internet could not match human sociality*. The Committee foresaw no adverse effect on live play; on the contrary, they thought that online play will take place mainly when there is no other possibility. In this case, Internet could prove – not negative, but - very positive for bridge. In the decade that has passed since then, the conclusions of the Committee remain valid.

Therefore, instead of worrying, we should rather:

b. Use the advantages of Internet to the advantage of Bridge

To a varying degree, this is the case in most countries today. NBOs use Internet for communication; they have access to information provided by them or to them; they use it to provide services to their members (electronic government) and to reach a wide audience outside their organization.

As time passes by, this trend will be accelerating and improving – as it should.

c. Face the disadvantages of Internet on Bridge by using sociality

If Internet was a perfect medium, it could well have changed our lives much more radically than it has done already. In this case, maybe there would not be a reason to have seminars like this, as clubs and NBOs might have ceased to exist. However, no matter how advanced Internet is, it is still far from being a perfect medium.

Bridge continues to exist and will continue to exist. But the new situation dictates a change of policy in our promotion efforts. Once bridge attracted people because the rich and the powerful played it, because it was the game of the diplomats, because it gave you status. Once bridge was, together with chess, the only inexhaustible game. Once people learned bridge to prove that they were smart and skilful.

These are mostly arguments of the past. Today's argument, in our highly competitive world, is that bridge, and *not* chess, is the prime social mind sport of our time.

d. Can we improve bridge?

After many changes throughout the centuries, bridge took its present form in 1925. Only minor changes have taken place since then.

Are we sure that present bridge cannot be improved? That it cannot become an even more interesting sport than it is today? It is possible that bridge *can* be made more attractive. And modern technology is on our side.

For example, for many decades, bridge was played with one set of boards because it was cumbersome to duplicate thousands of boards by hand. Accordingly, tournament results were not known before the end of the session. Today, we have duplicating machines and computer scoring which allow us to have scores board by board.

In all sports, competitors are fully aware of their situation relative to other contestants at any moment, and they adjust their strategy accordingly. In bridge, barometer tournaments allow competing pairs to know their scores almost as soon as they have

completed a round – but such tournaments are still far from being universally accepted. What about barometer team tournaments?

Improvements could and should also be made in the technical section. Notwithstanding the tremendous technical advances in recent years, we have not as yet succeeded in having all championship matches transmitted live, card by card, over Internet – an achievement already standard in chess competitions.

Internet and electronic technology will not stop to advance and provide us with more and more possibilities. We should invest in this technology to improve bridge.



Appendix I

Internet and today's challenges for the youth¹

by Panos Gerontopoulos

Many people maintain today that conditions have changed. Today's world and technology offer many challenges to people – especially the youth. With so many options available to them, young people are not so eager to get into bridge, as in the past. And, there is very little to do about it!

Well, I do recognize that the world has changed (and it will continue to change), but do not believe that the consequence of that is that bridge should become a pensioner's game. Not at all. If we understand the parameters of today's world, and act accordingly, we can achieve our aim.

Once upon a time, there were two games known almost all over the world, which differed from the rest. Indeed, Bridge and Chess are *inexhaustible* games. This means that there is such a large number of possible combinations available within these games, that nobody can grasp all of them in one life time. Accordingly, in bridge and chess, one can improve continuously, becoming better and better, but there is no person to claim that he has learned the game completely – that there is nothing left to learn! In most other games, you will notice, there is a moment when one feels that the game has no more to give back to him; because he has practically exhausted the possibilities of the game.

These times, have indeed changed. With the advent of computers, there has been a proliferation of (video or) computer games which are available to the user. And we all know that the market for these games is mainly the young people. Most of these games are not serious. They rely upon the impression they can make with the use of colour, sound and graphics. At the beginning they succeed in attracting the young people, but they soon run out of steam – they are exhausted by the user, who now seeks another game to kill his time. However, there are also some games which are very interesting – and with the improvement of computers, these games also improve. There are games so complicated, that can definitely be compared to bridge and chess. Sometimes, they are even better; in the future, they will be surely better.

Just to give an example, I will mention that both bridge and chess are what we call 'turn games'. In other words, each player has to wait for his turn and he can do nothing until the previous player has finished his own turn. In some of the most modern computer games, you do not have this restriction. Like in real life, you can make your plan and act at the moment you judge best for your interests without waiting anybody's turn.

Another example is the 'deterministic' character of bridge and chess. By that term, we mean that the result of a certain action is pre-defined in bridge and chess – the Ace always beats the King of the same suit; the Rook beats any other piece that lies first on its pre-determined path, etc. In real life, the strong is expected to beat the weak – but this is not always the actual outcome. Sometimes, contrary to expectation, David beats Goliath. This is what makes

¹ This article first appeared in the Daily Bulletin of the 2007 Central American Bridge Championships, as part of a series of articles on Youth Bridge.

life unpredictable to quite an extent. In the most modern computer games today, a tank beats a soldier but just, maybe, 95% of the time – as in reality.

Of course, this is not the end of the list, and, unfortunately for bridge, and even more for chess, this list will be expanding as computers get stronger and people invest more in technology. What does this mean? Has bridge run out of luck? Should we give up our beloved game and become computer addicts? Not at all!

Much more than chess, bridge has a tremendous advantage which has so far not been touched by computer technology. This is **sociality**, an inherent characteristic of our game. No machine can substitute for that, at least not with the present generation of technology. This is no news to us. Despite the telephone, we still wish to meet and chat looking at each other; despite television, it is still so much better to watch our favourite event live than through 'the box'.

Internet is the most serious challenge so far. The main reason is that whereas a computer provides a machine as a substitute for a human being (player), Internet allows us to play with and against real people. And, many of us do so with great pleasure! Also, the modern electronic games, available to the youth today, allow players to form teams and face other teams – but usually from a distance!

When the first on line bridge services became available in the late 1990s, some prominent bridge administrators expressed great concern about the future. They feared that players will find it easier to play bridge from home – seating in their arm chair and picking up the time, the duration and the other players of their game. Within the WBF, I was asked to chair an ad hoc Committee to study the possible implications on live bridge. Our conclusion was that Internet is not strong enough to beat the sociality of the human beings. We foresaw no adverse effect on live play; on the contrary, we thought that online play will take place mainly when there is no other possibility, In this case, it could prove – not negative, but - very positive for bridge. In the decade that has passed since then, nothing has happened to make us change the verdict of that Committee.

Therefore, the conclusion is that although we do live in an ever changing world (not so surprising, as Aristoteles has stated some 2,500 years ago that 'everything moves'), bridge has little to fear. Its strong social character arms it against the present state of technology, and gives it advantages justifying its presence in the life of a young person.



Appendix II

Internet Causes Depression

The news below caused surprise and concern when it appeared in the Press on 1 September 1998. Since then there have been many studies around the world with similar conclusions.

Even though users of the Internet tend to dwell in its social corners - chat rooms and e-mail - they feel more depressed and lonely the more time they spend online, a study suggests.

The groundbreaking study surprised even its authors, led by Robert Kraut, a social psychology professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

'We were expecting exactly the opposite', Kraut said Sunday. Before his research, he believed Internet use fostered social contact, especially in e-mail and chat rooms. One reason for the negative effect may have been that using the Internet left less time for the deeper relationships of friends and family, he suggested.

'People are substituting weaker social ties for stronger ones', he said. 'They're substituting conversations on narrower topics with strangers for conversations with people who are connected to their life'.

Kraut observes that the early history in the use of the telephone shows how misled telephone companies were by the initial usage. Early home telephone users were business and professional people, but there was mis-marketing because it was not appreciated by the telephone companies that other people would like to talk by telephone for no very specific reason. Use of the Internet at home leads to a decline in conversation and other social behaviour. Online friendships through chat groups and email are weaker than personal relationships, it was found.

Teenagers are apparently the most vulnerable to adverse effects. Kraut recommends having the computer in a living area rather than a bedroom, to maximise social contact in the family. Shallow relationships were also characteristic of Web friendships, and resulted in a feeling of isolation. The research team believes that the negative effects are caused by Net time diminishing the time available for real life. Parents questioned about the teenage use of the Internet formed the view that Internet access is a better way for their children to waste time than watching television.

