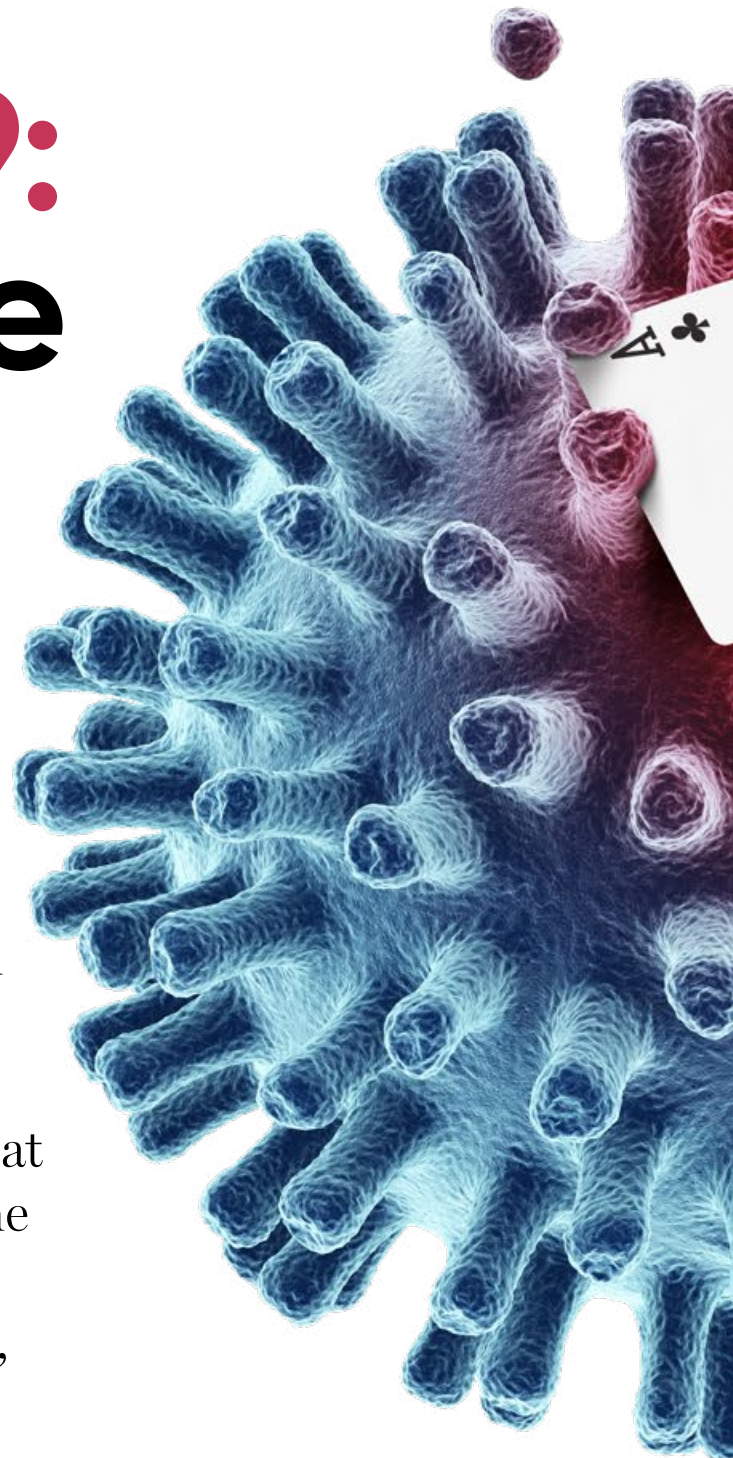


COVID-19: the bridge empire strikes back

PANDEMIC Not spared by the health crisis that has affected the whole world for months, the bridge community is having to readjust at all levels. An overview of the game under lockdown, from the first difficulties to emerging solutions, to possible developments.



by Gabriel
Taïeb



+15%

increase in time spent
on chat and video
conferencing applications
in the 1st quarter of 2020.



“W*e sounded the alarm, loud and clear. It’s not just a public health crisis: it’s a crisis that will affect all sectors.*”
It was with these words that the Director General of WHO spoke on March 11, 2020, describing for the first time the situation related to COVID-19 pandemic.

The sequence of events is known to all: a heavy human toll, the expansion of containment measures, the closing of borders... In the face of this crisis, there have been many consequences. Among them, the sudden slowdown in the world of bridge, which has been forced to follow established rules to stem the spread of the virus. At the start of the year, competitions had to be canceled in China and then around the world, directly impacting professional players. Quickly, amateurs were also affected. Today, all bridge players are facing this unprecedented situation.

“In this new context, the game has something reassuring. The share of usability and friendliness it provides is extremely important”

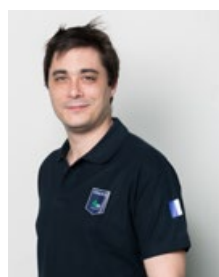
Monick Lebrun-Niesing, psychologist and researcher.

25%

The Norwegian federation has decided to concentrate its efforts on the development of new online activities. In addition to an increasing number of free and paid tournaments on Funbridge and BBO the federation's members are now also offered online learning courses. These efforts have resulted in a 25% reduction in the federation's deficit.

International closure

As a professional bridge player and member of the French team, Thomas Bessis testifies to the difficulties encountered by champions who can no longer travel. “I and one of my main partners were quickly informed of the seriousness of the



situation because we had a contract in China, where a championship was to be held in March. The next to be cancelled was the long awaited North American Spring Championship in Columbus. March-April is normally a important period for these two countries. We professional players

live from sponsors, and competitions. And all of these annual contracts seem compromised.” Asked about his current situation, Bessis said that he trained every

day on BBO, but only received “around 20% of (his) usual remuneration during this period”. He nevertheless underlines the support of his sponsors, who continue to accompany him as best as possible in online events. The situation is similar for tour operators, who are

faced with the cessation of their activities. “We are on stand-by. My whole team is on partial unemployment, and I am busy on the phone informing and reassuring customers”, explains the director of Bridge Plus, Euriell Queran. The family business, specialising in the organisation of trips and



simultaneous pairs, normally achieves most of its sales for summer holidays during this period. “We organise by staying in contact with our service providers, but we are very dependent

on announcements from the government and the way in which the relaxation of lockdown is organised. We try to postpone a maximum of our holidays to later dates, mostly in September-October. Fortunately, we have very loyal and understanding customers.”

The situation abroad

Contacted by the editorial staff of BeBRIDGE, several representatives of foreign federations were able to testify to the situation in their respective countries.



“Faced with the virus, Sweden has taken a completely different direction [from other European countries]. Our country has - for the

moment at least - decided not to impose confinement and to keep schools open” say two representatives of the Swedish federation. Aware of the emergency, and on the recommendation of the federation, the





vast majority of bridge clubs have nevertheless closed. *“We have made the decision to cancel our most prestigious event, the Open Teams, and we are awaiting new information before deciding on the other major competitions. We encourage clubs to organise games on BBO, but unfortunately their service only accepts a limited number of new arrivals”*, deplores the president of the federation, Martin Lofgren. In Norway, the federation has decided to focus its efforts on the development of new online activities. In addition to a multiplication of free and paid tournaments on Funbridge and BBO, the teachers of the federation continue their courses at a distance. These efforts made it possible to reduce the federation’s deficit by

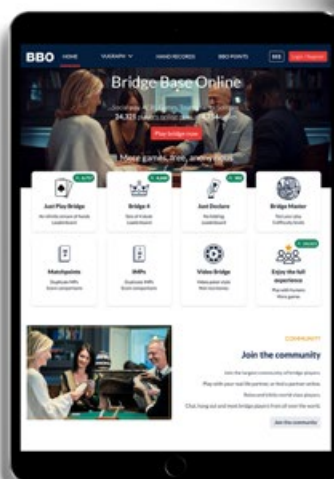


25%. “But that’s not all! Members of our national team were kind enough to test our idea ‘play with a star online’, which allows amateur players to team up with a champion. The concept

appealed to many, and I think it has great potential. Maybe that will give BBO the idea of hiring professional players”, enthuses Kari-Anne Opsal, president of the Norwegian federation. The online approach is shared in particular by the Polish and Israeli federations, which are moving towards new solutions to maintain their activities and continue to support their national clubs. The largest representative of bridge organisations in North America, the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) has been directly impacted by the pandemic, with several of its players

and employees having tested positive for COVID-19. Its director, Joseph Jones, nevertheless wants to be reassuring and indicates *“the safety and well-being of our employees and our members are our main concern”*. The ACBL was forced to cancel major events, including the national

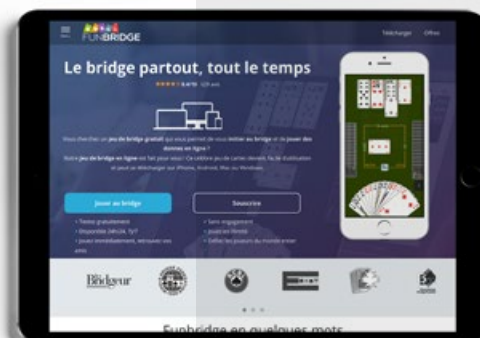
60 000
players have connected simultaneously to Funbridge and BBO to play online.



www.bridgebase.com



www.bridge-academy.com



www.funbridge.com

“Faced with the massive influx of players, we have worked with federations around the world to offer alternatives”.

Olivier Comte,
président of 52 Entertainment.



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spring and summer championships, without the certainty of being able to postpone them. However, the organisation remains active “*at a distance*”, with daily “*Support Your Club*” tournaments on BBO. In China, there are many online tournaments, and many platforms are used, but the federation has decided to make all these services free to allow everyone to play.

A world of solutions

In France, clubs – whose activities have ceased since March 13 on the recommendation of the FFB – are also evolving.

Bringing together more than 50 Ile-de-France clubs and 6,000 licensees, the Paris Bridge Committee focuses all of its

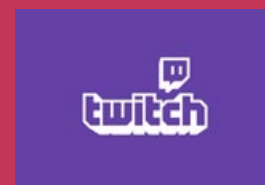


energy on support. Its president, Dominique Portal, details the actions carried out: “*We have started to relay information allowing independent professionals to benefit from the aid put in*

place. We also help clubs on all technical aspects of launching tournaments remotely. Finally, we list all these tournaments, with

Ever more inventive players

If Funbridge and BBO are like behemoths – all the more so today –, their limitations encourage others to be creative. Indispensable in this period of lockdown, chat and video conferencing applications such as WhatsApp, Zoom and Discord are also booming. Mobile market analysis company App Annie has also seen a 15% increase in the time spent on applications in the first quarter of 2020, with an increase in downloads of games and communication applications. It is therefore quite natural that players begin to turn to these solutions which allow them, on a private server, to chat with their playing friends and to film a game. The most experienced even turn to scripts that allow you to recreate a game directly on the chat service, or even to the Tabletop Simulator software which, as the name suggests, allows you to simulate almost any board game with the ability to configure each detail as desired. Enthusiastic spectators can also find many games broadcast live on the Twitch streaming platform.



85%

Information sites have never seen such an increase in traffic. The demand has been so great that sites have been forced to close temporarily.

their timetables and access methods, to allow our licensees to play quickly and simply."

On the Bridge Academy site, the students of Alain Levy and Michel Bessis can continue their distance learning, and keep in touch with their teachers via email. Other national clubs, such as that of Olivier



Giard in Toulouse, also continue their educational mission, but they note that some members have difficulties in using computers and online tools.

Nevertheless, the platforms of Funbridge and BBO stand out as major players in this current crisis. *"For many, the only possibility to continue playing is online bridge. We have a massive influx of players, and we quickly worked with global federations to come up with alternatives. Unfortunately, we did not anticipate such an influx and we are now forced to limit traffic"*, said Oliver Comte,



president of the group owner of BBO and Funbridge. Previously, the two sites used to host 25,000 players simultaneously. Today, nearly 60,000 players are connected at the same time.

Think about the future

However, for Olivier Comte, it is urgent to come to the aid of the clubs, which are more vulnerable than ever. *"In order for us to be in good health, the environment must be in good health. This is why we are thinking of many solutions, including the creation of a solidarity fund with federations (see the 'boxes' below)"*.

Representatives of federations, clubs and champions are mobilising behind a common message : *"Once the crisis is over, it will be essential to return to the clubs to support them"*.

A solidarity fund for weakened clubs

In partnership with the world federations, Funbridge and BBO quickly decided to create an aid fund for clubs, to help them get through the crisis. *"As companies in the business of playing games online,*

our support for clubs may seem contradictory", confesses Olivier Comte, president of 52 Entertainment

(group owner of Funbridge, BBO and Le Bridgeur), *"however, we are only a complementary service, which will never replace the real social experience of bridge. This is why we believe it is essential to support the community"*. To feed this fund, the platforms now offer special tournaments, as well as a new mode of virtual clubs, allowing the vast majority of the benefits to go to professionals in difficult situations. Building on their success, the sites are also in the process of thinking about creating charity tournaments to help NGOs and associations that are fighting against COVID-19 and the precariousness caused by the pandemic.

JANICE SEAMON MOLSON

Bridge, my love

TESTIMONIAL From the United States, Janice Seamon-Molson, holder of four world titles shares with BeBRIDGE her impressions of the situation created by Covid-19 and her daily champion's life, which has become as virtual as it is instructive.



Growing up in a bridge playing family is not for the faint of heart. As a child, I hated bridge and bridge players equally. After all, they took my parents away from me. It wasn't until my brother, Michael, took up bridge and became a part of my parents lives that I started to play. It took me no time at all to fall in love. All I could do was eat, sleep and drink bridge. From 1974 till 1990, I played for the love of the game. Then my Dad had a stroke and I took over his professional bridge business. I became a successful bridge professional. Since then, my "stock" has allowed me to pick and choose who I play with, a luxury not all people have. I only play with people I like but not necessarily my peers. I have had limited opportunity to play with experts as it is frankly too costly for both of us to give up the paycheck. So it's only in Women's and Mixed international events that I get that pleasure. Enter Covid - 19... I don't have to give you the low-down. The world as we knew it shut down. We were told hunker down and stay hunkered for however long it takes. Imagine the divorce rate over this. My daughter,

Jennifer, was forced by me to leave NYC and return to my home. She hasn't stopped complaining since she arrived. Fortunately for me, she is in class from 9-6.30 Monday through Friday. She's a musical theatre student. That means her dance classes are done with hangers as partners. I can relate!

To learn bridge is to love it

So how does a person get by these days? Well those with computer comfortable sponsors can continue to play via on-line bridge. But not all the people I play with can do that. My 90-year-old plus clients can't. Still is there any better way to spend your time than a game of bridge? Apparently, I am not the only one who feels that way. The internet is bubbling with top players playing for the love of the game. Of course, you don't have to be a top player to love this game. To learn it is to love it. BBO has saved all our lives. Covid may well have saved bridge in the US. Doesn't matter what time of day or night you look on BBO there are tens of thousands playing either teams or pairs. The ACBL has instituted SYC (save your club) where daily club games are held and most, if not all, of the entry money goes back to the club you play through.

Expert bridge players in the US can hone their game and their partnerships. Every day I play in a game with Kerri Sanborn, Jill Meyers and Sylvia Shi. We are the Baker team if there is a world championship for us to try and qualify for. We play for between 1.5 to 3 hours. I am loving it. Jill wants Kerri to play Multi and Polish 2 bids. Kerri is willing but has never done it. Easy BBO fix, a teaching table with perimeters set so these hands come up. Jay Whipple, who had been invaluable to bridge, is working on a Zoom presentation where you can enter a room of any of the four players and hear them talk about what they are thinking and why they are doing what they are doing. You can even ask

questions. It is a continuation of Kibitz the Pros which was started a few years back, as part of the common game.

Gary Cohler, David Berkowitz, Sylvia, Daniel Korbel and I have been working with him on that.

I see people making youtube videos teaching bridge concepts. Another advantage of on-line learning. My favorite

is a lady who sold out 3 days in a row teaching people how to use the BBO software to play online. Creative and needed. Patty Tucker, who was inducted into the Bridge Hall of Fame last year, is doing online beginners classes. Hopefully when all this ends, we will have developed new players and better players for our game.

Degree of concentration

I end this article on a personal note. Online bridge activities in the time of Covid are wonderful. Teaching using the online methods available is rockstarish. However, I, personally, strongly object to seeing this become the way of the future. I do not want online events at levels of the World Championships or even at the NABC or European Championships. For me, it's not the way of the future. I have not studied anything but was told by a reliable source that playing on the computer is a different concentration level which is not as effective as actually sitting at the table. Based on the way I have been playing on the computer, I really hope this is true.

Just learned that Quebec is banning gatherings through August 31. This means no summer Nationals. I hope all of you stay safe and we see each other "on the other side" of Covid.

“Still is there any better way to spend your time than a game of bridge? Apparently, I am not the only one who feels that way.”

Janice Seamon Molson

Interview

“Keeping playing is always good”



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WELL-BEING Interview with Monick Lebrun-Niesing, psychologist and researcher specializing in Educational Sciences, about the positive effects of practising games during lockdown.



**COVID-19:
THE BRIDGE
EMPIRE
STRIKES BACK****BeBRIDGE. – Why take an interest in games in the context of your profession?**

Monick Lebrun-Niesing. – As a psychologist in National Education, I work mainly with children. However, I also work with the adults on the educational team. In parallel, I did a thesis on children's play and I continue to publish international scientific articles on the subject. In my opinion, games are a great educational and development tool, which enhance interactions and personalities.

B.B. – How is the practice of games useful today?

M. L.-N. – For children, play can help distance learning, which can sometimes be difficult. However, it also makes it possible to establish a zone of normality, which is reassuring, because it is part of everyday life. It must therefore be maintained, because it simultaneously stimulates children and protects them a little from the external context. For bridge players, and the seniors who make up the majority of these players, it's a bit similar. If they can continue playing, it is always beneficial. By joining friends online, with whom they usually play, they find a part of ordinary life and friendliness, which is extremely important. What is difficult in this

new context is to maintain ones habits. We are seeking, by all means, a return to normality. In addition, play is something very inherent in a personality. A player will identify himself as such, it is part of himself. The game becomes something secure, which was there before, which endures, and which makes you forget your problems for the duration of the game. All the more so for people of a 'certain age', since they are constantly reminded of the idea that they are in danger. It's really a way to find a secure area at home.

B.B. – At the end of March, the WHO launched the "Play apart together" campaign which recommends video games during lockdown. Until then, the organisation was very critical of the video game sector. Are things changing for the game?

M. L.-N. – With or without COVID-19, we need to favour games that develop our creativity and allow us to forge social ties, as well as to refocus on ourselves. I am not for excessive consumption of digital entertainment, but it can be complementary. We are in an extraordinary situation and if computer-screens allow us to do certain things, so much the better. However, it is a temporary substitute, it is important to come back to reality afterwards. Whether playing alone or with others, adults or children, it is a social bond. It gives communication. We discuss during the game and about the game. It helps to negotiate with our emotions. This is why it is so important.

Thanks to...

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