



iBridgePlus and iBridgeBaron

Simon casts his i over a couple of bridge-playing Apps

I SHOULD start by declaring a lack of interest; I do not have a mobile phone. For years I have seen people wasting their time playing games on their phones on the underground while I am busy doing the Sudoku puzzle in the free paper.

'But what if the game they were playing was bridge?' Elena asked me.

'Ah, that might be different,' I replied.

And so it was that I was given an iPad (only on loan, alas) on which to try out some bridge-playing Apps.

iBridgePlus is based on the German QPlus program that came third in the recent World Computer Championships in Bali. I found it simple to use and well laid out (easy on the i). There are 22 detailed bidding systems to choose from, including American, French, German, Danish, Italian, Precision and six variants of Acol. You can pick from a menu of leads and signals, but you can't change anything in your chosen bidding system. So if you select Advanced Acol, you are stuck with playing Inverted Minors and its version of the Multi 2♦, whether you want to or not.

You can set the playing strength of your opponents (the iLevel function) although this, not surprisingly, affects the amount of thinking time the program uses. The length of time that the program takes to pick a card diminishes as the play progresses. My expert friends tell me this is a manifestation of the Principle of Restricted Choice.

If you want to learn as you go, there is a good 'assist' feature which will give you hints and explanations of bids if you ask. It also tells you if a bid is 'questionable' and gives you a warning if your play is 'weak'. Questionable and weak are polite computer-speak for bonkers and barmy.

After a brief look at the menus, I started playing offline teams-of-four matches with medium level team-mates and opponents. I won about half the matches (well, nearly about half) so was not inclined to increase the skill level. At the end of each

deal I could review the bidding and play in the closed room, which was very instructive. One particular four-board match will never be forgotten; we bid and made 6NT (flat), I made 4♥ doubled (+13 IMPs), we beat 2NT doubled by two, but the same contract had gone three down in the other room (-7 IMPs), and, lastly, I made 3NT redoubled but only gained 2 IMPs because my opposite number had made 3NT doubled plus one. There isn't an option to ask for dull part-scores; it's a roller-coaster ride all the way!

After playing stand-alone bridge for a couple of days (iBridgePlus has over two billion deals, more than enough to keep you going from Knightsbridge to Uxbridge via Putney Bridge), I went online.

Option one is to download a mini-session of twelve boards and play them offline. The strength of the opponents is pre-set and you can't have any help. The charge for each of these sessions is i\$2, where an i\$ is worth 10 pence. When you have finished playing the deals you upload your results and are told something like 'You are lying first out of five.' There are eight sessions a day (four for beginners) and each is active for twenty-two hours. After a session closes you are emailed the final result (I came second), the detailed scores and your prize (I won i\$5). It's fun and it's a pretty inexpensive way of flexing your bridge muscles against a mixture of man and machine.

Option two is similar, with the twelve boards being played as a head-to-head (hand-to-hand? i-to-i?) challenge match against a specific opponent.

After all that, I had a look at the American iBridgeBaron. Its big brother, Bridge Baron, is a past World Champion and recently came fifth out of twenty in an ACBL Bulletin expert bidding forum.

The program was easy to find and download (iContact). Broadly speaking, iBridgeBaron is similar to iBridgePlus: it too has over two billion deals; you can play

standalone or on-line; there are useful hints and recommendations; and it has 20 bidding systems to choose from, including three Acol ones. The review option, where you see what happened in the other room, is excellent. You can specifically ask for part-score deals (although that doesn't mean they will be dull).

I played with the level set to 'advanced' (the third highest setting out of four) and it seemed to me that the quality of iBridgeBaron's bidding and play was not quite as good as iBridgePlus with a mid-level setting. I didn't like the screen images as much as iBridgePlus', particularly the size of some of the touch icons and the layout of the East and West cards.

The major advantage with iBridgeBaron is that you can modify your chosen bidding system, with over 80 conventions and options in Advanced Acol (Drury, Kokish, lebensohl, etc). For some users, this may outweigh the disadvantages mentioned in the previous paragraph. I also liked the (iDeal) feature whereby you could type in four hands and see how iBridgeBaron would bid them or play them.

In case you were in any doubt, computers don't have a sense of humour. I tried psyching with both systems, but neither of them could take a joke. They supported my non-existent suit far beyond the bounds of bridge logic, but at least, unlike my human partners, they didn't comment as our opponents racked up 1100 and 1400.

I am writing this in early December, and I have just taken a couple of minutes off to send a letter to Santa. I have asked for an iPhone with iBridgePlus and an iPad with iBridgeBaron – or the other way round, they both work just as well on each platform. My Sudoku-playing days are over.

iBridgePlus ★★★★★½ £9.99

iBridgeBaron ★★★★★½ £13.99

