

Bridgeware 2004: A review of bridge playing software

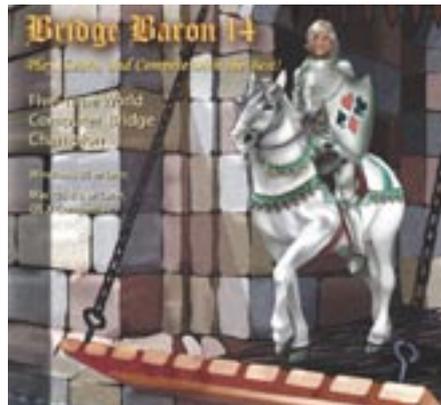
By **Pietro Campanile**



We have all read, heard or experienced in first person the computer revolution which has changed so completely the way we communicate, work and spend our spare time. We are not surprised anymore hearing about computers playing chess better than 99.99% of mankind, nor by the ever-growing world of online gaming. Until a couple of years ago this all-conquering cyber-army had encountered only a few areas which did not or could not master and one of them was bridge. The few attempts at tackling our elusive game had turned up products whose competence was barely stretching to a weak intermediate player. The energies (and the money) dedicated to improve the quality of the bridge playing software has been considerable and, thanks also to similarly huge advances in the speed and power of the average PC, most of the products are now capable of a much better performance. In this review we will analyze the best that is currently available on the market in their latest version: Bridge Baron 14, GIB 6.1, Jack 2, Micro-Bridge 10 and Q-Plus 7.5. All these programs come with a lot of useful basic features: it is possible to enter, edit and save hands, either manually or in PBN format (Portable Bridge Notation); they can be configured for network and/or online play. They offer hints during bidding and play, they can

generate hands according to set criteria of distribution and/or points; they all have extensive system libraries from which to make up the convention card of our dreams, both for the human and the computer player; they all offer English as main language but the issue of localization has become more and more of a selling point, so much so that quite a few of them provide alternative languages (never Hebrew though).

Let us introduce them one by one.



Bridge Baron 14

This is the latest version of a program which started off 15 years ago with a new graphic interface which is extremely easy to navigate. The program has an extensive selection of systems to choose from, its bidding and play levels are quite competent with the occasional black out especially in defense (sounds like I am

writing about myself!) and there is an ample choice of tournaments, taken from recent US National championships, which the player can enter and where his score is matched against the original field. The unique feature which sets Bridge Baron apart from the rest is the attention given to learning tools for players wishing to understand and practice conventions: appropriate deals will be selected



Bridge Baron gets to the top contract of 6♠ matching Bocchi-Duboin's result in the last session of the Bermuda Bowl Final (Meckstroth-Rodwell stopped in 4♠). Unfortunately it also matched the Italian declarer in the final score: 6♠-1.

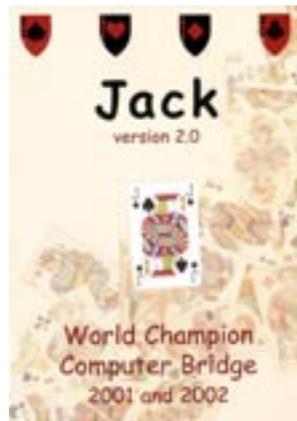
on demand from the vast library to let the player practice its poison of choice in a monitored environment. In addition to that, Bridge Baron (like GIB) comes with a very useful add-on for beginners: the excellent ACBL "Learn To Play Bridge" will be an invaluable tool to understand the basics of the game. The budding experts among us have not been overlooked either: the 144 hands contained in the "Blackwood challenges" will represent a very tough nut to crack for most players. An excellent choice for those who are looking for a "complete" program, able to assist them in learning the game as well as playing it, Bridge Baron 14 is available in Israel at a price of 421 NIS.



GIB 6.1.3

GIB (Ginsberg's Intelligent Bridge program) has the largest selection of languages (ever fancied playing bridge in Finnish?) and comes in a CD case with a rather too concise manual. Matt Ginsberg has always prided himself in privileging the quality of play over graphic frills and this latest version does him proud, the level of defense in particular is as good as I have seen from all the programs reviewed. Mainly targeting the USA and UK market, it includes a selection of systems consistent with such an objective: 2/1, SAYC, ACOL and a few variations on the theme with "Moscito" being the "odd one out". Another huge plus is the amazing library of deals from all the main world competitions of the last decade or so, available to be replayed and scored against the

actual results achieved at the table. The only annoying feature I noticed was the inability to "switch seats" when declaring a hand after your computer "partner" has won the auction: it feels rather weird to declare the hand while seated in dummy. Its latest version contains the ACBL "Learn To Play Bridge" software, already mentioned earlier. An excellent choice for those who are looking specifically for a strong play/analysis program and for its huge deals library, GIB is available from online merchants for \$80 + shipping.



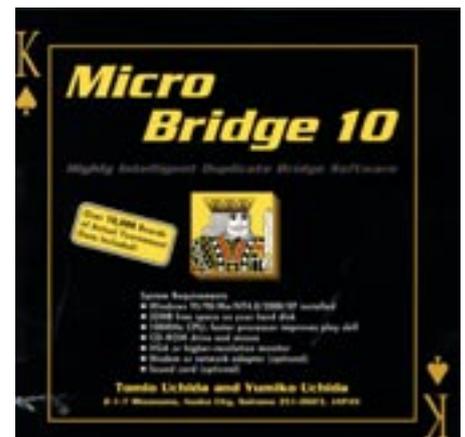
Jack 2

The brainchild of Dutch programmer Hans Kuijf, Jack has won the last three World Computer Bridge Championships and that is a great testimonial for its excellent level of bidding and play. It comes in a nice box with a well written 20 page manual. The graphics and the controls are very clear and the program offers a large number of tournaments (mostly Dutch events) for the player to test himself on. Clearly developed with the Dutch market



Jack stops in 4♥ in this board from the last Bermuda bowl final, matching the result of Hamman-Soloway. Bocchi-Duboin got to 5♥, one too many as the cards lie.

as its main objective, with local star Berry Westra as the "friendly genie", its increasing popularity should probably suggest a more international look to broaden its appeal to those who are not familiar with the Dutch bridge scene, for instance it would be a good idea to include some more systems like Precision, UK Acol, French 5 card major and Standard Italian. All in all a very good all-round performer which retails in Israel for 421 NIS.



Micro-Bridge 10

This is a Japanese program developed by Tomio Uchida, but, fear not, it has a complete English version too! Its graphic interface is simply excellent and all its many features are easily controlled through a very user-friendly layout. The quality of bidding and play is quite good and there is an addi-



GIB has a steady action to the normal spot of 3♣. In the Bermuda Bowl, Bocchi-Duboin bid to the unbeatable 3NT on the E/W cards, while Hamman-Soloway played in 4♣.

tional plus for the system-freaks among us: the possibility to create and enter a system from scratch, so for those of you who want to practice their unusual methods or devise the best defense against them this is certainly the feature you will be toying with. Just a couple of minor niggles: there are many tournaments supplied but they are all from Japanese events (which may or may not be the kind of field you want to test yourself against) and the scoring is the US style numerical MP version as opposed to the European percentage which we are used to. A good choice for

those looking for a great performer and an easy, user-friendly program, Micro-bridge is only currently available from online merchants for \$70 + shipping.

A nicely contested auction with N/S getting to 4♠, will the Micro-Bridge declarer guess the diamonds like Versace did when he made the contract against Hamman-Soloway, or will the defenders take their 4 tricks first?



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by **WM. TALLEY ELLIOT**

with apologies to Rudyard Kipling, et al.

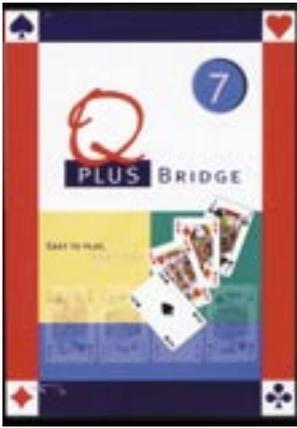


If you can play your hand when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust your partner when he doubts you,
But make allowance for his doubting too:
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting;
Or being set too much, don't blame your hand,
Or being baited don't give way to baiting,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too bland;
If you can play—and not make play your master;
If you can win—and not make gain your aim,
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same:
If you can bear to hear the bids you've spoken
Twisted by Fate to make a trap for fools,
Or watch opponents win with each rule broken,
And deal and play and still abide the rules;
If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on a Grand Slam bid and lost,
And smile, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss:

If you can Force your partner and he passes;
Or deny, and see him still bid high,
And see the score the other side amasses,
And do not criticize or even sigh;
If you can play with fools and still continue
To calmly watch your partner wreck
If adverse bids and Overcalls don't irk you,
If it's always something pleasant that you say
If you can fill the unforgiven minute
With sixty seconds worth of fair play done
Yours is the deck and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a freak, my son!

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Q-Plus Bridge 7.5

Hans Leber is the mind behind this superbly packaged program, which comes in an elegant box with a very detailed 60 page manual. Q-Plus has a rather unique graphic look which takes a little time to get used to but is quite stylish in its own way. It performs at a good level in all the areas of the game but it is particularly strong in the

bidding and offers a large library of tournament deals from recent international and online events. Another important advantage for those playing a strong club systems or wishing to practice against them is that Q-Plus, as well as Bridge Baron 14, has ready-made Precision systems for their use. The only quirk I noticed was the bidding box featuring the strange order of East-South-West-North as opposed to the traditional West-North-South-East. The excellent manual and its versatility make Q-Plus a good option to choose, especially if the company's policy of always



The Q-Plus West understandably upgrades its hand to a 1NT opening and both sides have an exciting auction to 4♠. In Israel-France, the Israeli pair played in 3NT-3, while the French were in 4♥-1X in N/S.

straining to develop a local language option will mean that it will produce a Hebrew version. Q-Plus 7.5 is currently only available from online merchants at around \$ 80 + delivery.

Program	Packaging & Manual	User friendliness	Choice of Systems and Settings	Bidding	Declarer Play	Defense	Tournament Deals Library	Learning Tools for Beginners
Bridge Baron 14	7	8	9	8	6	6	8	YES
GIB 6.1	7	7	7	8	7	7	10	YES
Jack 2	8	8	7	8	7	7	8	No
Micro Bridge 10	6	9	9	8	6	6	7	No
Q-Plus 7.5	9	8	9	8	6	6	8	No

Conclusions:

There is often very little to choose from the programs we reviewed: the level of play has now reached a skill level comparable to that of a good club player, often with very refined bidding tools turning out rather elaborate sequences. The defense seems to be the area where most of the attention of the software developers should be concentrated in the near future: most of the programs have a remarkable tendency to be very active in situations where passive defense should be fairly obvious. There again this is a weakness common to many intermediate-advanced players so it should not come as a surprise. The most intriguing feature, which has quickly spread across all the different platforms, is the inclusion of tournament deals which allow a player to "compete" and match his results with the best in the world. It is a very addictive and clearly popular option which is usually complemented by the possibility to add

more tournaments, downloaded from the Internet in PBN format. The final choice on which program to purchase is not straightforward and will depend on a careful analysis of what our premium requirements are, which graphic interface we are most comfortable with and the price/value ratio.

A final word to say that all the programs have been tested at their highest skill level for an average of 6 hours play on each and when assessing the review it is important to remember that setting each program at the highest skill level can slow down play considerably (but no more than in a board played at a real life table) and that most users will still enjoy playing by adopting a medium skill setting. The bidding and play test puter players on 12 boards chosen from the Israeli-France match at the 2002 European Championships in Salsomaggiore and the last 6 boards from the unforgettable Bermuda Bowl Final between Italy and USA.