

Why is Bridge so exciting yet so boring?

November 1, 2021—When trying to explain Duplicate Contract Bridge to someone for the first time, I'm always faced with the same dilemma: how to compare and contrast the depth and excitement of the game while avoiding the boring parts.

Baseball: 54 catches, tags, or a bunch of misses

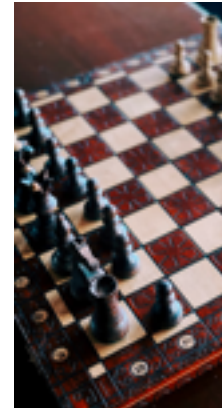
Consider how you'd explain the excitement of baseball to someone who's never seen or played before. You might say it's a team of players playing against another team of players who take turns hitting a ball with a stick and running around a field while the opposing team tries to catch the ball or touch the running players with the ball to take them out before they can complete the course. Hitting the ball very far results in a bonus course completion. The game ends after an amount of time that includes 54 catches or tags over nine rounds of six. The defending team could also end the game quicker if they cause their opponents to swing and miss at the ball lots of times.



How about football? It's a bunch of men on two opposing teams who pass a ball to each other hoping the catcher can run the course of a field to score points while dodging their opponents who are trying to knock them to the ground. The game ends after a predefined amount of time and the team that has the highest score wins.

Chess: move your pieces to disable their pieces

Let's try describing chess. Two opposing players move their respective army of pieces around a game board. Each piece has restrictions on how it can move and capture opponent pieces to eliminate them from their arsenal and negate their threat. Combining the powers and shortfalls of each piece along with anticipating the movements of the opponent requires a lot of analytical thought. The first player to capture one specific opponent piece wins the game.



How does one explain poker? Everyone at the table gets two cards that are secret to the respective players. There are three rounds of publicly-shared community cards that any player can use to make the best possible hand. Players bet money on their two cards and the community cards to persuade the other players to give up on the round regardless of how much money they've already contributed or risk losing even more money.

While all of the above descriptions accurately describe their games, they are overly simplistic in their depictions and sound pretty boring. It's absurd to think any of them accurately portray anywhere near the strategy, depth, and precision each has in their own right and what makes each of them so unique and exciting to play and watch. Hundreds and even thousands of books have been written about each of these time-honored games depicting every minute aspect of the game, and books continue to be written.

The complexities are vast

Just as these games are so complex that eludes being described in a paragraph or two, duplicate contract bridge can be as unique and exciting as any of them. Consider the first two examples of baseball and football. Each requires two teams to play where poker and chess are individual games. Of course, poker requires a minimum of 4 opponents to be viable where chess must be played one-on-one. Duplicate Contract Bridge pits a pair of players against other pairs in the game. While there is a version of bridge where only two pairs are needed and another where 4 players comprise a team, let's take one complexity at a time.



In the game, each player of a paired partnership must convey the strength or weakness of their hands to their partner using only a series of bids in order to yield fruition. Suits are ranked so that one suit outranks the suit(s) below it and higher bids outrank lower bids. After one partnership refuses to bid higher over their opponents, the "contract" is established and the hand is played by one of the two players in the partnership while it's defended by the other partnership. If the winning partnership wins or exceeds the number of tricks bid, they are rewarded with a score, and possibly a bonus, if they bid high enough. If they fail in their attempt, the opposing team, known as the defenders, earns a score and possibly a bonus, too. If the defending partnership bids a "double" during the bidding round, rewards are increased for the respective triumphant partnership. However, the contract partnership didn't bid high enough, an even larger bonus is forfeited.

To succeed in duplicate contract bridge, players in a partnership must accurately depict their hands to their partners without any assistance other than the game's bidding cards. Bidding is silent in that words and gestures are not used. Over the years, various bids have taken on different meanings to indicate number of cards as well as the strength of those cards in the four suits. Some bids aren't statements at all but rather questions which must be answered by the partner, again using only the bidding cards.

Understanding the relationships between bids and scoring outcome is critical. Sometimes, it's useful to overbid, fail to take the required number of tricks, and earn a small penalty rather than allow the opponent partnership to earn a larger score and bonus.

In duplicate contract bridge, you are playing the same exact hands as other partnerships in the game so that your partnership will score some number of points (or penalty score) while other partnerships playing the same hands in the same game may bid and score differently. If you consistently score better than all of the other partnerships in the room, you and your partner will win the tournament.

It's a big world out there

Duplicate contract bridge is played worldwide. There is a national organization in the United States called the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) with 150,000 members. When playing in any ACBL-sanctioned Bridge Club, ACBL members earn points which are attached to them for life. Earning more points leads to advancing in prestige rank.

A game typically consists of about 25 hands played in about three hours. After each game, it's common for partnerships to pour over the hand records to see where they did well and where other partnerships excelled. Tweaking strategies to improve for the next game is always fun in and of itself. For most intents and purposes, there is no maximum number of partnerships in any one game.

More important than accumulating life points and prestige is the mental challenge, memory enhancement, and social aspects of the game. While duplicate contract bridge, just as chess and poker, can take years to master, one can learn the basic rules and strategies over the course of a few days.

Come visit

If you're in the Las Vegas area and would like to be properly introduced to Bridge with some beginner lessons or even to just watch a game, please contact us and we'll be happy to show you around! We pride ourselves on being the nicest bridge club out here and look forward to welcoming new members.

Marvin Raab, 57, continues to be an avid board and card gamer for over 40 years and a professional Information Technology expert. His ever-growing game collection is over 250. Originally from New York City, he spent over 25 years in the Silicon Valley area before moving to Las Vegas in 2014 and opening a Bridge Club earlier this year with 2 years of bridge experience. When not focused on bridge, board games, or technology, he's watching Netflix and studying crypto and NFT landscapes. He can be reached at marv@bridgeopolis.com and the website is <https://www.bridgeopolis.com>