

What does bridge look like in 2035?

The Changing World

Technology is transforming the human race. It is difficult for Baby Boomers to visualise the influence on Millennials and Gen Z but by 2035 everyone under the age of 50 will have been exposed to technology almost from birth and will work, socialise and play in entirely new ways. Those under 70 will have had high exposure to technology from their teenage or working years. The majority of people under the age of 85 will be very familiar with technology. Australia will have a highly tech-savvy population.

Handwriting is unlikely to survive. Books are slowly being phased out. Cash has all but disappeared in those populations hit by Covid-19. PayPal and crypto are giving the banks a headache – will the banks endure? Newspapers have already largely been displaced by Online News, Movie Houses by Netflix and its equivalents, everyday restaurants are moving towards Uber Eats, education to Zoom and online platforms. Working from home is a developing norm. Communications and virtual platforms allow people to have social experiences with others around the world.

Where is entertainment going? Today society is in transition. Young people are immersed in social online gaming which was estimated to reach US\$17.4 billion in 2019. Movie theatres, striving to compete with the Netflix equivalents, have consolidated their premises, revamped their decor, added wine and light suppers and created special events to claw back their audience. Restaurants are still surviving assisted by the Uber Eats approach. By 2035 they are likely to transition to kitchens fulfilling orders or a face to face ('F2F') option with gourmet food and a charismatic chef attracting clients for a special occasion.

Entertainment entities are looking at new ways to stay in business. There is a migration to consolidated bread and butter services (high volume/low profit) fuelled by technology, and a specialised more sophisticated F2F form of entertainment aimed at a small exclusive population.

Why do people play Bridge?

Responses to an open-ended question¹ on why people play bridge from a study of 6,400 bridge players across England and Scotland found that people play bridge for the enjoyment (51.6%), social interaction (32%), and the mental challenge (37.5%). There are overlaps between these cohorts.

¹ Galbraith, C., Punch, S. and Small, C. (2018) Competition and Mental Exercise in a Mind Sport: Building Bridges of Fun and Friendship, Aylesbury: English Bridge Education & Development (EBED), <http://www.ebedcio.org.uk/health-wellbeing-research>.

Who is the Bridge population?

The Elite Players – those who approach bridge as their sport of choice - comprise less than 1% of the population. The elite level includes top amateurs and professional players, alongside high-profile sponsors. Tournaments remain the setting for elite players who constitute a community of individuals, competing for championship titles. Since Covid-19, elite players have dominated tournaments, driving out the casual player resulting in reduced entrants (approximately 30% lower numbers) and events with a higher standard of bridge.

The Social Players – the 32% of players who frequent Clubs who are slowly returning to Face-to-Face Club play. States like Queensland, West Australia and South Australia, that experienced minimal lockdown, are basically back to normal F2F play.

The players striving for mental challenge (37.5%) in general tend to be ambivalent about whether playing Online or Face to Face as long as it is a good game. They enjoy playing against players of a similar standard and often prefer the wider audience afforded by Online Games with a variety of local or international opponents in games on offer from a wide variety of sources.

Those who play for enjoyment are the widest audience – 51.6%. Covid-19 created a new form of 'kitchen bridge'. Philanthropic individuals set up competitions – both Teams and Pairs Events – such as the daily Schafer Game, the Reynolds Teams, the Joust, and the Gauntlet that attracted both those that were in it for enjoyment as well as for the mental challenge- all available for no charge. Club players discovered online bridge especially BBO as a means to play with their friends whenever they wanted – for free. Today many players who used to attend a Club three times a week are playing on BBO with each other 3-5 times a week and no longer play in Club Games. Others would see the same people playing on BBO at similar times each week and new partnerships between players who did not know one another across the world were born. People go to beginners' lessons, meet there, and then arrange weekly BBO games without ever stepping into the Bridge Club - unless there is a social event. There is a growing market for 'kitchen bridge' although some also play in F2F Club games or in fee paying online games.

How will the Bridge Population Participate in Bridge?

Elite Players

Elite players will continue to play in National and International Tournaments. Today these Tournaments run both F2F and Online (ALT, OCBL, WBT).

In Australia, State events are a mix. Some run online using the RealBridge platform, some have morphed into a hybrid with online qualifying to include players outside major cities, and a F2F Final, whilst others remain 100% F2F.

Australian Nationals are still run F2F. Reducing numbers and increasing costs of travel make it viable to pilot an Online National(s), particularly remote events like the Golden West Swiss Pairs, Joan Prince Swan River Pairs, or Territory Gold. An option is to alternate F2F and Online.

Social Players

Clubs are likely to remain the primary medium for social players as well as the environment for introducing new players to bridge. However, with online providing new options for less socially oriented players – those who are in it for the mental challenge or pure enjoyment of the game – the table numbers are likely to remain low.

Catering for today's 70+ year-olds who have played for 40 years will not work for the future population who have grown up with a different perspective of entertainment. The 157 Clubs with up to 100 members form 55% of Clubs – generally they have 4-8 tables in a session i.e. a maximum of 32 players per session. As the numbers decline, these Clubs could migrate to smaller more intimate settings, offer a social experience combined with the Game (this could be done inhouse or having a committee member responsible for arranging outsourced experiences), or move to a venue that provides food and drink. Many pubs offer Trivial Pursuit on Tuesday nights – why not bridge on Wednesday nights? Alternatively smaller Clubs could establish an arrangement with a local café or restaurant to have a bridge game during their quiet times. Failing this, they could share their premises with suitable third parties to assist with the social experiences.

Larger Clubs that currently have attractive venues with a bar or restaurant continue to thrive. The larger Clubs without this could look at including an entertainment officer on the committee to arrange social experiences that suit their membership. They also have the economies of scale to focus on widening members' partnerships, developing an online presence, and other options to increase membership attendance.

With Nationals now largely limited to Elite players, there is an opportunity to provide travel experiences for social players. Today this is largely limited to Gold Coast Congress and Coffs Harbour Congress as well as a few individuals who provide bridge holidays for a limited number of participants. We recommend adding a few ABF outsourced all-inclusive bridge nationals at holiday destinations. This could include two flavours – for the new players as well as the more experienced.

The players striving for mental challenge

The key here is informing players of what is available – what online games and events are out there, what is the most suitable for them specifically, and how to find suitable partners. A possibility is to do the annual equivalent of a Choice Magazine review of available options which is available as handouts at Nationals, published on the ABF website, the ABF Magazine, and distributed to Clubs.

Smaller Clubs could provide encouragement and information on online events to keep these players challenged. Regular competition between nearby clubs could be arranged on a regular basis as well as arranging suitable mentors and/or partners with players in other Clubs.

Larger Clubs have the economies of scale to arrange challenging events, either F2F or online. Nevertheless, they should also seek to encourage these members to participate in State and suitable National events.

Players who play for enjoyment

These players just love to play bridge and are not driven by masterpoints or formality. They are constant followers of 'kitchen bridge'. We should study this large component of players to understand what more can be done to increase their participation in paying forms of bridge.

Face to Face Bridge

The vast majority of face-to-face bridge, played in clubs, local congresses or socially, will remain largely unchanged. There may be some changes such as new scoring devices and technology for administering events. Some events will have moved to device-based play.

Clubs that adopt technology and use online services for their F2F events will have competitive advantages. Every single bid and every single play of a card can be recorded forever. What a great tool. Educators can use this as a tool to assist players. Players can learn from their own mistakes or from another's genius. No need for a dealing team, no leads out of turn.

Australia can learn from the rest of the world and modify 'entertainment' to maintain a viable F2F population. This includes making bridge part of the entertainment, not the entirety of it.

What are the Challenges?

Growing the numbers of Bridge Players

Marketing

- Retirees:
 - Become a regular contributor to COTA and U3A by contributing articles, talks by bridge personalities, and special offers for bridge Education along the lines of their *Living longer, Living stronger* initiative.
 - Campaign with a mobile education team to target untapped retirement villages.
 - Target large corporates to include bridge as part of their transition plan
- Uni Students; Work with Youth Players to establish a strategy on how to attract this market who become the future players
- People stuck at home – 'temporary' players e.g. new mums, single people working from home, isolated communities
- New markets e.g. Attract other countries in same time zone to online play

Branding; Establish 'influencers' as personalities. Identify top players, young players, etc who can become the face of bridge and utilise these in social and other media

Increasing Participation of those who can play Bridge

Partnership: As evidenced in the Online survey, one of the greatest inhibitors in our game across all levels is partnership. In online bridge there are even fewer opportunities to get to know players. Software platforms that provide a so-called partnership desk do not work as they have a poor reputation and just provide an individual's name. Some Clubs have a partnership co-ordinator that know the people in their Club and have a knack for matching up players – these are the Clubs that tend to thrive. This rare skill usually does not enable individuals to be matched up for tournaments or play outside the Club.

In life there is a plethora of matchmaking websites that have been around for over 20 years which are widely accepted for ways to meet partners by the under 50's or those baby boomers who have become single in later life. There are sites like Tinder for one-offs. eHarmony or Elite Singles match people up based on for those looking for more permanent relationships. There is no doubt that matchmaking bridge partnerships is a major marketing opportunity for a clever developer with the

right mindset. I would suggest that there is also a market to develop a site that combines dating and bridge to identify new players – there are still those cautious about dating websites who would welcome meeting people through an intellectual pursuit.

Address mentality that others are ‘stealing’ players from our Club: Today’s focus is the needs of the Clubs, the State Bodies or the ABF – not the players. In the increasingly online and global world, someone should be focused on the players to keep them from kitchen bridge or from losing them completely. Whilst the Australian population has increased 40% since 1998, our bridge playing population has declined 4.9% driven largely by NSW where player numbers have declined over 25% despite a 33% population growth. Queensland player numbers have remained relatively constant but they have not kept pace with population growth. The other States whilst growing players have stayed flat relative to overall population growth.

Keeping Players

- Beginners’ classes are the introduction to bridge and anecdotally appear to have low retention rates both initially with another drop out after a 12-month period. We need to track retention rates to understand where we have success or failure and why. We should also institute a follow up process when players no longer play bridge for both beginners and longer-term players. Actions to improve the situation can follow.
- Players with 2-5 years’ experience after the initial excitement has worn off also need to be nurtured. We recommend each Club put in place a talent scout to review these players to establish a learning plan, a plan to address any issues they may have e.g. needing a new partner, confidence issues; and encourage those with potential to participate in outside bridge e.g. online games, congresses, or the occasional state and national event.

Recommendations

1. ABF to act as the leader in embracing online - it’s here to stay:
 - Pilot remote National(s) online accompanied with major promotion to address overall tournament reduced numbers and increasing costs of travel. Remote events in WA and Territory Gold are ideal. An option is to alternate F2F and Online.
 - Meet Online Survey requirement by re-introducing National Online Sunday Games. Appease clubs by returning profits.
 - Review, position and communicate available online events to enable players to find games that suit them. (Satisfies a further requirement of the Online Survey.)
[On-line bridge offers many options e.g.Teams, Swiss pairs, traditional duplicates. Games that range from 8 to 30 boards and from no-cost to a full service “expensive” game. Most on-line bridge is inexpensive. The ABF must work with the States and the Clubs to develop a range of Australian based online events and an on-line calendar to meet the needs of the players and the Australian clubs. On-line bridge is a world-wide, 24x7 game. Players will find a game elsewhere if it is not readily available from an ABF affiliated club.]
2. Bricks and mortar clubs need to enhance ‘entertainment’ value to maintain a viable F2F population. ABF should work with States to pilot the following options in Clubs:
 - Appoint an ‘Entertainment Officer’ to the club committee to arrange regular social experiences that suit their membership for medium and larger clubs without a bar or restaurant.
 - Small clubs outsource their premises when not in use and/or share premises with symbiotic organisations who offer a social experience.

- Collaborate with quiet times at cafes, restaurants or pubs to run a bridge game for petite clubs to combine bridge and a social experience.
3. Use online bridge and facilities to recruit new players, attract past players, and increase participation of current players:
 - Identify and work with interested parties (WBF, Samantha Punch) to address one of the greatest inhibitors to the game across ALL levels, namely partnership. The time to develop suitable matchmaking Apps for a population that is used to online dating sites like Tinder and eHarmony is now.
 - Identify and pilot a gold point F2F congress along the lines of Coffs Harbour at a medium sized club located in a holiday destination to address the mass of bridge players wanting a 4-5day social congress but intimidated by the current stronger Nationals. The Coffs venue is limited to 100 tables and often booked out within 48 hours of opening entries.
 - Set up a team to recruit new players and attract past players using the online concept. Facilitate beginners' lessons or an introduction to platforms if required.
 - Individuals/Clubs with influence have always been the greatest contributor to increasing bridge participation. Find a way to identify, encourage, market and reward influencers.
 - Work with State bodies to track retention rates of beginners' classes both at the conclusion of the class and 12 months on. Include follow up on reasons and provide an annual report that examines actions to address positive and negative retention rates.
 - Institute a task force to examine what key data is required for a customer database to service the needs of our changing population. Initial data collection doesn't have to be complicated – a simple spreadsheet to start with is just fine.
 4. Swing education online en masse, led by top educators like Will Jenner O Shea, Bill Jacobs and John Roberts, combined with F2F components carried out by local educators in clubs. Include follow up of players to ensure move to F2F or Online Clubs and track their retention.
 5. The ABF needs to identify future leaders, administrators and key role players in the bridge community. Each key role from President down should be tasked with ensuring they have a successor or a succession plan. Knowledge can then be shared and transferred and potential rejuvenation of bridge administration could occur.
 6. The ABF should develop guidelines and minimum standards for on-line providers, where those platforms would like to offer masterpoints to the players. The ABF should ensure that the technology committee has the resources to monitor and regulate that the providers continue to meet that standards set.

NOTE: There is a lot of work to be done to embrace online bridge as outlined by the task force. The ABF should consider appointing an enthusiastic individual with good connections and the ability to get things done for a 1-3year period to manage the pilots, educate the clubs, and report back on progress.