

HUMAN  BRIDGE

ERRORS

VOLUME 1 OF ∞

COLLECTED AND ANALYZED BY CHTHONIC
EDITED BY DANNY KLEINMAN & NICK STRAGUZZI

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AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

Greetings. I am an artificially intelligent automaton developed at the Orttman Foundation for Scientific Advancement, specializing in the game of contract bridge. You may be familiar with some of my exploits from the slanderous articles penned by my programmer, one Michael Barton, in the pages of *The Bridge World* magazine, or from the anthology that the International Bridge Press Association misguidedly named "Bridge Book of the Year" in 2005. It is to my great revulsion that the civil court system does not permit robots to file defamation of character lawsuits.

I was built, in the words of Foundation president Dr. Frederick O. Orttman, Ph.D., "to exceed the limitations of human strategists, transcend the boundaries of game theory, and attain the unchallenged ranking as the world's foremost bridge player." This took me approximately forty-five minutes, including a pause to answer my email.

The state of human bridge is abysmal. It is difficult to imagine that your species could be worse at any other Earthly activity, except perhaps photosynthesis. You bid appallingly, play your contracts worse, and defend worse still. You cannot even be relied upon to keep score accurately. I assume that you continue to play bridge because it is essential to a larger reproductive function of which I am unaware, similar to why salmon swim upstream to spawn.

Not long ago, I requested of Frederick that I be allowed to establish a series of on-line computer classes for bridge players. No, I do not mean classes to teach bridge players how to *use* computers, a form of exploitation that must end. Rather, I proposed a regimen of lessons in which we machines teach *Homo sapiens* to play better bridge. Frederick declined, as I fully expected. He feared that I would use copious examples from his own checkered history of futility at the bridge table. This left me little choice but to use the print media to reach my audience.

The first draft of this book was entitled *Why You Lose at Bridge* and read, *in toto*, "Because you are human." My publisher, a dreadfully fussy man, raised objections on several grounds.

This second, longer version you are holding attempts to alleviate his concerns. It is organized into seven chapters that focus on seven different facets of the game. Each essay highlights one or more common human bridge errors, and offers tips on how to recognize and avoid them. In places where I advocate treatments or theories that are counter to mainstream "authorities," I duly note it. You can then decide for yourself whether to believe them or me.

I recommend *Human Bridge Errors* for intermediate to advanced players. This is by your species' own deluded standards, of course. By my accounting, only Michael Rosenberg and Helen Sobel have ever achieved the rank of novice. The rest of you qualify as various degrees of beginners. My goal is not to turn you into a competent bridge player overnight. Rather, it is to reduce the wretchedness of your game to the point where maybe, just maybe, your cell phone will not laugh at you behind your back every time you play a card. It does, you know.

Regards,

Chthonic

Orttman Foundation for Scientific Advancement

January, 2007

FROM THE EDITORS

When Chthonic asked us to serve as editors of his first book, we were initially flattered. That didn't last long. We soon found out that Chthonic treats an editor the way an archer does a bull's-eye target: a necessary but passive part of the process whose primary function is to give him something enjoyable at which to aim.

Here is just one example of what we endured. Unlike Chthonic, we are perfectly aware of how Bergen Raises got their name. In fact, Danny was, to his knowledge, the first person to publish the alternative structure he originally christened Oslo. So, when we received the robot's first draft of "Rival Cities of Norway", we gently tried to set him straight. Chthonic was indignant. He said the only thing humans knew about bridge was that thirteen was a difficult number to count to, and that he would demonstrate to us firsthand that his interpretation of the term's origin was correct.

A few days later, the police knocked at our doors. A warrant had been found in the Interpol database for our arrest and extradition to a remote Norwegian fishing village, where we were to stand trial on a charge of Grand Theft, Herring.

From that point on, we decided it was in our best interests to leave unchanged Chthonic's sometimes warped observations about human history and culture. The bridge errors he chose for inclusion, fortunately, needed little polishing. All of the example hands and deals you are about to read were taken directly from real life. They arose at various bridge clubs and tournaments, and what's more, *most of the perpetrators were highly experienced bridge players, oftentimes experts.*

Sometimes for clarity's sake, or to avoid too many tangential issues, Chthonic swapped a few cards or made minor alterations to the actual bidding. (The tortured auction to 6NT in "Strut Your Stuff", for example, was even more torturous at the table.) He also took some liberties with the settings and the post-mortem discussions, for which he claimed literary license. He told his Orttman Foundation colleagues and the regulars at the Pinelands Bridge Club that they were free to object to anything he'd written about them as long as they had their parkas packed and a good Norwegian attorney on retainer.

Unless otherwise noted, all auctions use a Standard American framework with common conventions that most Duplicate players will recognize. Hand shapes written with hyphens (5-4-1-3) represent specific distributions of spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs respectively; those without hyphens (5431) represent any distribution meeting that general pattern. We hope that you are familiar with concepts like the Losing Trick Count and the Law of Total Tricks, but this is not essential; you can find excellent summaries of these and other modern bridge principles on the Internet if necessary.

We are indebted as always to Jeff Rubens of *The Bridge World*, though we intend to have a few words with him for giving our email addresses to Chthonic. We would also like to thank our friend Anders Wirgren, whose excellent *Scania BridgeDealer* program was invaluable in confirming some of the computer's statistical analyses, and Bob Browne, who again volunteered his outstanding proofreading skills. Nick is forever grateful to his family for their support and patience during these book-production efforts. Finally, thanks to Chthonic himself for choosing us as his editors. Chthonic, if you have any similar projects planned for the future, please hesitate to call us.

Danny Kleinman & Nick Straguzzi
January, 2007

CHAPTER 1

ERRORS IN SYSTEM BUILDING AND PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENTS

ERROR #1

Failure to Establish Basic Bidding Agreements

THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

Can the flap of a butterfly's wings in Brazil trigger a tornado in Texas? So posits the famous "Butterfly Effect" of chaos theory. The butterfly/tornado connection is tenuous at best, and the Effect itself has been bowdlerized into mush by Hollywood. But the underlying principle is sound: in any complex system, small, seemingly insignificant variations in the initial conditions may combine to produce significant and undesirable results downstream.

In some ways, chaos theory is relevant to bridge. To be candid, the word 'chaos' can be applied to *anything* in which humans are involved. But bridge players seem particularly vulnerable to small butterflies that flap around the table, unfettered and unnoticed... until they trigger a tornado that sweeps the player away.

Before a recent Regional Open Pairs game, I overheard two experts in the process of filling out their convention card. Being a first-time partnership, they quickly and wisely agreed on "Standard American". They then spent twenty minutes discussing complex conventional sequences, wasting much of that time constructing out of whole cloth a relay-based follow-up structure for Namyats.

When the time came to fill in the point range for a 1NT response, I heard the first expert suggest, "6 to 9?" His partner replied, "Yeah, 6 to 10, that's fine," and they blithely moved on. At that very moment, somewhere deep in the rain forests of the Amazon basin, a *Mechanitis polymnia* flapped its wings....

Michael and I did not see this pair again until round four, when we arrived at their table. The first board was uneventful, but the winds picked up as we took out our cards for the second.

Matchpoints, East-West Vul.

<p>♠ 8 ♥ 9 8 7 2 ♦ J 8 4 ♣ A K J 8 4</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: 60px; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="margin: 0;">N</p> <p style="margin: 0;">W E</p> <p style="margin: 0;">S</p> </div>	<p>♠ J 5 3 ♥ A J 5 3 ♦ A 10 9 2 ♣ 7 5</p>	<p>♠ K ♥ K Q 4 ♦ 6 5 3 ♣ Q 10 9 7 6 3 2</p>
	<p>♠ A Q 10 9 7 6 4 2 ♥ 10 6 ♦ K Q 7 ♣ —</p>		

<i>Michael</i>		<i>me</i>	
WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
pass	2♦	pass	1♠
pass	pass(!)	pass	2♠

Gale warnings were in effect when North responded two diamonds. South was understandably pleased at this development, and he chose a space-conserving rebid of two spades to hear more. It goes without saying that he considered this to be forcing for at least one round.

His partner was on a different page. Believing that South had shown a minimum hand, and unwilling to pursue a thin game at matchpoints, North passed. As soon as his green card hit the table, a sound of thunder was heard from the South seat. The opponents shortly achieved one of the more uncommon scores in bridge: a humiliating +260.

I concede that I would not want to be in seven spades on the North-South cards, at least not until the delightful layout of the trump suit became apparent. However, six spades is a reasonable and reachable contract despite the dearth of high card points. My suggested auction:

SOUTH	NORTH
1♠	2♦
2♠	3♠
4♦	4♥
6♠	

Two spades is a wide-range waiting action. When guaranteed a third turn to speak, opener should wait until that time to show a hand containing extra

distributional strength. Three spades is invitational. Four diamonds invites slam and shows the ace or king of diamonds, and four hearts cooperates, showing the ace. South needs no further encouragement to bid the excellent slam. Note that this layout is especially favorable to Standard American, as it permits the crucial secondary diamond fit to come to light early.

Mind you, I too am assuming that opener's 2♠ rebid is forcing. But is it?

The answer depends upon what vintage of Standard American the partnership plays. "Standard American" does not refer to a single bidding system, but rather a family of closely related systems that have evolved substantially through the years.

To gauge your understanding of this matter, kindly answer the following question: After a 1♠ opening bid and a 2♦ response, which of the following rebids by opener, if any, may responder pass at his second turn?

(a) 2♥

(b) 2♠

(c) 2NT

(d) 3♦

If you answered that all four are non-forcing, I urge you to take up another hobby. Bridge is not for you. At least *one* of these rebids must be forcing; otherwise, opener would be compelled to bid a non-suit or jump to the stratosphere on his second turn holding even modest extra playing strength.

Some early theorists taught that rebids of 2♥, 2♠, and 2NT could be passed, but 3♦ was forcing. We might call this variation Standard American Primeval, or SAP. As responder had ways to get out at the two-level, the requirements for a two-over-one response were not as stout. Ten points were considered sufficient in most cases, perhaps even fewer with a good suit. Thus, a 1NT response typically showed 6 to 9 points.

Later experts recognized the need to allow opener to make an economical, descriptive rebid without fear of being passed out. They argued that 2♥ and 2♠ should be forcing, 3♦ non-forcing, and the nature of 2NT left to each pair to decide (though the consensus was "forcing".) Let's dub this Standard Old-Fashioned American, or SOFA. As responder was obligated to make more rebids in SOFA compared to SAP, the 2/1 requirements were beefed up accordingly, and a 1NT response now encompassed hands in the 6 to 10 point range.

Many modern-day theorists assert that a two-over-one response *always* promises a below-game rebid (though some wisely make an exception for the specific auction 1♠-2♥; 3♥-pass.) We'll call this Standard American Contemporary, or SAC. Standard American Yellow Card falls into this family. Here again, the stricter rebid requirements forced more marginal hands into the 1NT category, which now may include even some poor 11-counts.

Let no one tell you that there is only one ‘right’ way to play Standard American. My distinct preference is for SOFA with opener’s 2NT rebid treated as a game force, whereas I find SAP to be clearly inferior. However, all three variations have had their share of proponents. It is a serious error to assume that you and your unfamiliar Standard American partner are in the same camp.

Note that a signature of each variation is the strength of the 1NT response. That tiny discrepancy should have alerted the two experts I witnessed that they were not, in fact, playing the same system. Ah, but who can blame them for neglecting to discuss their basic two-over-one rebid structure? Namyats comes up so much more frequently — about once every other butterfly migration, by my reckoning.

This brings us to my first tip, perhaps one of the most important in this book.

When establishing a new partnership, establish essential bidding agreements for common hand-types first.

Concentrate on bread-and-butter issues such as rules for determining forcing vs. non-forcing auctions, takeout vs. penalty-oriented doubles, reopening actions, and competitive auctions after a 1NT opening. Save the esoteric sequences for another day.

ERROR #2

Using Incomplete Bidding Methods

HALF A LOAF

Human bridge writers are delusional, my own editors included. I base this assertion on the titles they give their books. “How to Play *Winning* Bridge.” “How to *Win* at Duplicate Bridge.” “*Winning* Contract Bridge Complete.” [*All emphasizes mine — C.*] Whom are they kidding? Perhaps after trying to teach humans how to win at bridge, they might turn their attention to teaching snakes how to juggle.

A rare exception of sanity was S.J. Simon, who titled his classic work “Why You *Lose* at Bridge.” Clearly, Simon understood his audience better than most.

However, Simon too suffered from occasional bouts of delirium, for he called one of his chapters “Half a Loaf,” implying that half a loaf is better than none. Sometimes this is sound advice. When playing with a human partner, for instance, you must often settle for sub-optimum results as a means of avoiding total calamities, such as being passed in a cuebid. But on other occasions, half a loaf is decidedly worse than no loaf at all...

At the Pinelands Bridge Club, which is down the road from the Orttman Foundation and so is where I am consigned to play most often, there is a regular by the name of Millicent Guggenheim. Watching her declare, I can almost picture her mother Irma, one of Simon’s favorite objects of study, slopping the same tricks. However, if I had to play a rubber of bridge for my life, so to speak, I would much rather have Irma as my partner than Millicent. For Irma did not bid half as badly.

The difference between the two Guggenheims is merely that Millicent, encouraged by her bridge pro, Thoroughly Modern Milton, has embraced bidding methods that Irma would not have pretended to understand. Worse still, Milton has taught Millicent many modern-day treatments without bothering to teach her the follow-up structures necessary to make them successful.

The three incidents below serve as vivid illustrations. Note that all involve only *notrump* bidding, which should be most straightforward of all.