

Improving Your Experience at BBO Tournaments

The Clontarf Area, Glasnevin Region and FoxBay Virtual Clubs have now been up and running for over a month and between them, have hosted about 70 tournaments. Most players are now familiar with the basic functions of the BBO system and the time has now come to expand your knowledge a little.

Etiquette

Let's start with etiquette. It is a depressing fact that some people, who are perfectly delightful when you meet them face to face, become somewhat less delightful online. Please try to avoid this by observing the following advice:

1. Identify yourself.

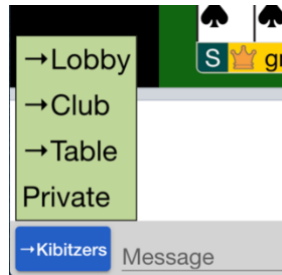
The screenshot shows the 'Account' page with tabs for Profile, Settings, Convention cards, and Deal archive. The Profile tab is active, showing the username 'rgmd3' and two password fields, both marked as 'Required'. Below the passwords are two main sections: 'Skill level' and 'Country/Region'. The 'Skill level' dropdown is set to 'Private'. The 'Country/Region' dropdown is set to 'Ireland'. A 'Save changes' button is at the bottom. Red arrows point from the 'Real name' field (containing 'My Real Name') and the 'Other' field (containing '4 Card Major. 12-14 NT.') to the 'Real name' and 'Country/Region' labels respectively.

You should enter your real name into your account details. If you don't want to enter your full name, you may be able to identify yourself to fellow club members using just your forename or surname, if either are sufficiently unusual, or perhaps one of your names and an initial.

- a. To do this, log on and click "Account".
- b. Your profile should appear. If it doesn't, click "Profile".
- c. Now edit the "Real Name" field.
- d. Click "Save changes".

2. When you arrive at a table, or when others arrive at yours, click on your opponents' names. This will cause their profiles to appear. If they have followed the above advice, you will see who they are. If they have followed the next piece of advice, you will see a description of their system.
3. Give a brief description of your system. Again, the easiest way is to enter this in your profile. Follow the instruction in 1 above but edit the "Other" field as opposed to the "Real Name" field. BBO has a facility to enter a full-blown Convention Card but it's a major palaver and hardly anybody will ever read it. Even if you decide to do it, you should still enter the brief description as described here.

4. It's common courtesy to introduce yourself and state your system in chat. Something like "Hi. X&Y here, str & 5".
5. It is especially rude, but depressingly common, for people to fail to reciprocate that courtesy. If this happens, send a message to the table asking for their system. If they don't respond, call the Director.
6. Never make rude or derogatory comments in chat. This is fortunately unusual, but I have seen such comments, usually referring to the pair who have just left the table.
7. To use chat, locate the chat line. It's usually at the left side on the very bottom of the

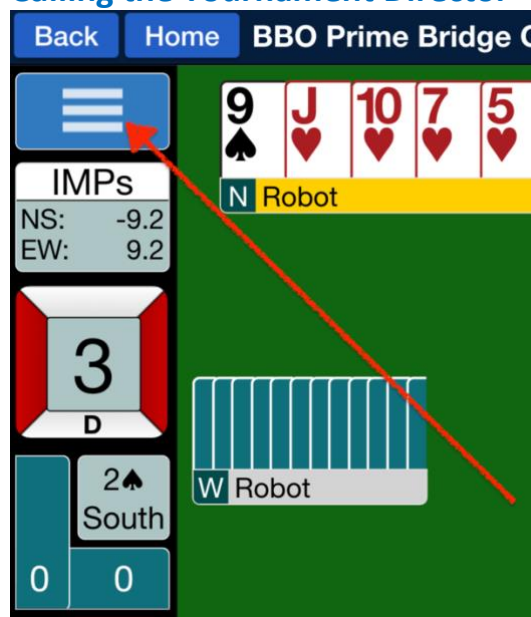


screen. On tablets, it may be at the bottom right. There is a blue button labelled with the name of the place your chat will go to. It should read "→Table". If it doesn't, click on it and select "→Table" from the list of options that appear. Type in your message and click "Chat".



8. Never make smart comments about your partner's play or worse still, your opponents'. Smart comments of any kind, which you might just get away with in person, can be quite offensive in print, and appending a smile emoji 😊 may not eliminate the offence. Even a wdp (well done partner) may cause offence, if your partner's good result was due of poor defence on the part of your opponents. In general, the best policy is to keep your comments to a minimum.
9. Dummy in BBO is subject to the same limitations as Dummy in the real world. Make absolutely no comments at any time during play if you are Dummy. In particular, you must **never** exhort your partner to claim. Not only are you breaking Dummy's vow of silence, but you are potentially giving unauthorised information.
10. You should be aware that all chat is recorded and can easily be accessed by the Director if, for example, there is a complaint. Indeed, if everything is running smoothly, some Directors amuse themselves by following chat. You have been warned.
11. Speaking of warnings, be aware that the Director can see all four hands. If a pair are exchanging unauthorised information, by virtue of being in the same room or by communicating with one another using text, phone, Zoom or whatever; that behaviour will be detected. How? There will be discrepancies in bidding, leads or play, which might go undetected in the real world, but are glaringly obvious to a BBO Director who is watching the hand being bid and played in real time. Of course, people sometimes make honest mistakes in bidding or leading which, once in a while, work in their favour. However, if a partnership regularly makes such lucky errors, or are regularly finding inspired leads or lines of play which are completely inexplicable, it will be detected. The vast majority of players are ethical and would never even dream of behaving in such a manner. However, between the three Virtual Clubs, there are in excess of 500 players, so it's not beyond the bounds of possibility that there might be a few who might be tempted to try this. That would be a seriously bad idea. Remember, it's all recorded and kept indefinitely.

Calling the Tournament Director



If there is a problem at your table, call the Director. To do this, click on the “Hamburger Menu” at the top left of the screen and click “Call Director” from the menu that appears. This causes a message to appear on the Director’s screen and brings him or her to your table.

Make your message specific. So, for example, if you want a board reviewed, refer to it by its number as opposed to something like “the first board in the last round”, and state clearly and succinctly what the problem is. Please refrain from communicating with the Director using a private message to his or her personal BBO name. **Never** phone or text the Director.

Note that if a player disappears i.e. their name goes red, the Director will know about this and will be dealing with it. Calling them will simply increase their workload and will do nothing to accelerate the process of recovering the player. On the other hand, if a player who is still at the table, freezes, call the Director immediately.

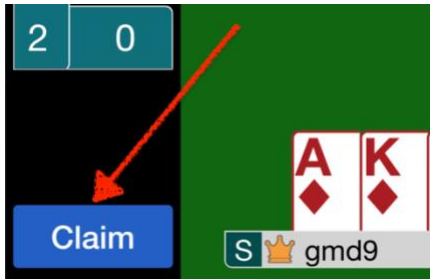
If your partner is replaced by a Robot, don’t waste the Director’s time asking for your partner back. Directors will be following a protocol to retrieve your partner. The robot will be replaced by your partner or by a human substitute as soon as possible, but that can be 5-10 minutes. The Director will be very busy doing this. Don’t distract them.

If a board is timed out, the computer will try to predict what would have happened using a program called GIB (Ginsberg's Intelligent Bridgeplayer, which also powers the Robots). It’s remarkably good at its job. In cases where there is doubt, the Director will be asked by the system, to check GIB’s opinion. This process takes a bit of time, and calling the Director won’t result in a change in its outcome. However, if you feel there was an irregularity which might influence the outcome, you should call the Director and explain the situation.

Slow Play

We set the time per board at 7 minutes and at this stage, nearly everyone finishes with time to spare. We will occasionally allow a little extra time if we have to put a substitute in, as a courtesy to the substitute. Apart from that, we don’t change the time allowed.

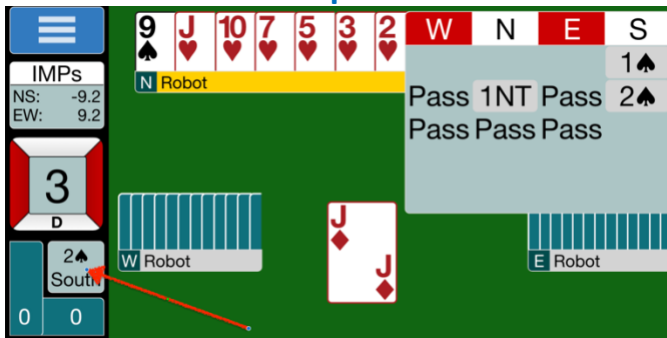
Be aware that Directors tend to be watching slow tables in case they are called upon to evaluate the score assigned by GIB, if the table times out. The director can see all four hands and will readily detect players who are purposely trying to time out a bad board, because they are trying to get an average. This strategy might work occasionally but if it’s detected, you will get the poor score you deserve and the benefit of any doubt will go to your opponents. It’s completely unacceptable behaviour and you will be caught.



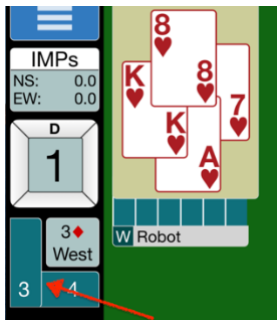
At a certain point in the game, when you are declarer, a Claim button may be visible on the bottom left of the screen. If you are certain that you have the remaining tricks; rather than playing the game out to the death, please claim. This saves time and pain for all concerned. By default, the system will claim all the outstanding tricks but a window appears which allows you to modify this and also gives you the option to explain the play you

propose to make. If you are defending and declarer claims, please don't just sit there passively. If you do, the game hangs for about 30 seconds, waiting for your response, and then continues. Please assess the situation and if you agree with declarer's claim, accept it. Equally, or perhaps even more importantly, if you don't, ***reject it quickly*** so the game can continue. Do not sit there waiting for the claim to time out. That drives everyone crazy! Note too that ***both*** defenders must accept.

A few other bits and pieces



On the left of the screen, there is a small box, displaying the contract that is being played. If you click on it, you can see the bidding that occurred to reach that contract. You can do this at any point during the game. To get rid of the window containing the bidding, just click on it.

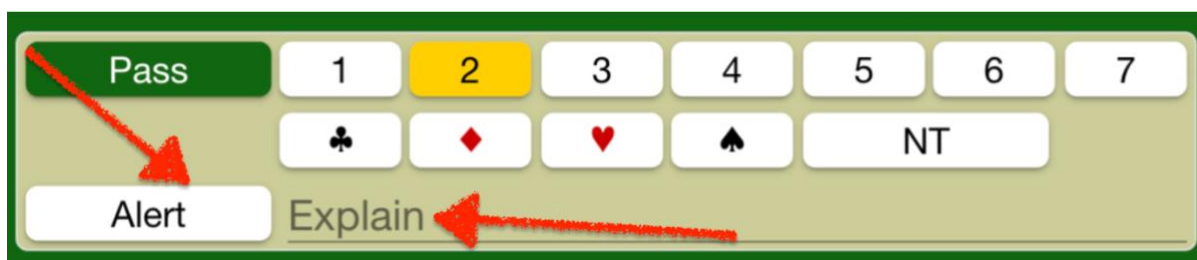


There are two small boxes arranged in an L shape around the box displaying the contract. Clicking on either of the small boxes brings up a window displaying the last trick played. Again, to get rid of the display, click on it.

Alerting

You should be starting to pay attention to this now. In BBO, you alert ***your own*** bids; ***not*** partner's. Only your opponents see your alerts, your partner does not. This will seem odd at first but it's more or less the system used in International Competitions, where players are screened. It is actually very fair.

So, let's say you are about to overcall opener's 1NT opening and you play the Landy Convention. A bid of 2♣ shows both majors and about opening points. It absolutely must be alerted.



When it is your turn to bid, you click on the Alert button that appears in the bidding dialog box and type something like “Both Majors, opening values” and then press 2♣. Click Alert and type your explanation **before** pressing 2♣. Both of your opponents see a red border around your bid and your explanation appears in a small window at the top right of their screen. Your partner sees nothing except your bid; no red border, no explanation. That’s all there is to it!

You can just hit the Alert button and bid without entering any text, and your opponents just see the red border. That might be ok for Stayman or an Acol 2♣ opening but for anything more exotic, you should usually explain what it is. If you don’t, you will most probably be asked, so it saves time and aggravation just to do it. How will you be asked?

If a bid is made and you want an explanation, just click on it. This causes a box to appear on the screen of the player who made the bid, requesting an explanation. Allow about 30 seconds for the explanation to appear. If the player concerned ignores the request, a box eventually appears saying “No explanation available”. Consider calling the Director.

This all takes a little getting used to, but it’s really quite straight forward. There is another issue regarding alerts and explanations. You must **never** use chat to alert or explain a bid. Why? Because partner sees it and that’s unauthorised information. The **only** bridge related information that you are allowed mention in chat is the brief description of your system, which you give at the beginning of each round.

Note that you can also **announce** your bid, as per CBAI regulations. Just to remind you, there are three situations where you are required to do this:

1. When you open 1NT, you must state the range so “12-14” or “15-17” or whatever else if you are playing something exotic.
2. When you make a Jacoby Transfer bid, state “transfer to hearts” or “transfer to spades”.
3. When you open a **non-forcing** 1♣ or 1♦ and that opening may show fewer than 4 cards in the bid suit; state “Could be x”, where x is the lowest number it could be e.g. “Could be 2”.

To make an announcement, enter the message in the text field of the bidding dialogue, but don’t click the Alert button. Incidentally, to produce a ♣ symbol in chat, enter !C (it must be a capital). This work for the other suits too; so !D, !H or !S.

Which calls do you alert?

1. All conventional bids with the exception of Stayman and the Acol 2♣ opening. Note that if you are playing one of the less common variations of Stayman (Puppet, Non-Promisory etc.), these must be alerted. Likewise if your 2♣ opening differs from the usual Acol 2♣ opening, that must be alerted.
2. Any *forcing* 1♣ opening.
3. All jump bids must be alerted. Just state whether strong or weak.
4. All 2-level opening bids (other than the Acol 2♣) must be alerted.
5. Normal 3 level preemptive opening bids do not need to be alerted.
6. All 4 and 5 level openings should be alerted.
7. Any forcing Pass must be alerted.
8. Doubles may need to be alerted as per the following CBAI regulation: "Any double, during the first or second round of bidding, of a 1 or 2 level Natural Suit bid, is deemed to be a Take Out Double. All other doubles are deemed to be Penalty Doubles. All variations must be alerted." To clarify, any double of a NT bid is assumed to be for penalty. Note also that Negative Doubles (including Sputnik Doubles, if you are of a certain age!) are a type of Take Out double.
9. The 3NT limit, above which bids are not alerted during the auction does not apply. Why? That rule exists because such alerts are more likely to benefit partner than opponents. In BBO, partner never sees them so that caveat doesn't arise.

If you think this is all a bit tedious, remember that your opponents have an absolute right to know the details of your system. The quid pro quo is that you have an absolute right to know what they are doing. It is particularly unfair to less experienced players to fail to alert things like weak jump overcalls. If you observe the rules outlined in this document, you will enhance the enjoyment of your game for both yourself and partner and for your opponents. That's what good bridge should be about. **Be aware that players are absolutely required to alert their conventional bids and to declare the meaning of any jump bids they make. If your opponents fail to do so, click on their bid to ask them for an explanation. If they don't respond, call the Director.**

Internet Issues

BBO does not require a particularly fast broadband connection, but it absolutely requires a **stable** connection. If your connection is unstable, you may sometimes fail to get into a Tournament for which you have registered. Having got in, you may find yourself disconnecting from time to time. This will ruin your game and partner's game. It will upset the pair you are playing against when it happens and will stress your Tournament Director. It's something you really want to avoid, for your own sake and that of everyone else involved.

Your Internet Service Provider (ISP) is responsible for the quality of signal entering your home. You are responsible for what happens to that signal once it has got in. In my experience, it is unusual that the problem is actually due to your ISP. The majority of problems are due to issues around what happens the signal after it arrives in your home.

The signal arrives in your home via old fashioned copper cable in the majority of cases, using the Eir network (regardless of who you buy your service from). This will give you speeds up to a maximum of 100 Mbps down/10 Mbps up if you live beside the local cabinet (those green boxes you see on the side of the road), but typically, it will be significantly slower. If you are lucky you might have a connection using coaxial cable using the Virgin Media network. That can give you up to 500 Mbps down/50 Mbps up. If you are really lucky, you might have a fibre optic connection to your home. That gives you 1,000 Mbps. Very few areas in Dublin can get this. Note that lots of ISPs refer to fibre in their advertising but that usually means fibre to cabinet as opposed to fibre to home.

Notwithstanding the above, even if you are relying on a relatively slow connection, it will probably be fine for BBO when it arrives in your home. The wire is connected to a box in your home called a router. From there, it is typically converted into a radio signal called WiFi. Your laptop or tablet connects to the internet using that WiFi signal and therein lies the problem, in the vast majority of cases.

The routers typically supplied by your ISP are not great. To ensure you have a stable connection, you really need to be close to the router and ideally have a line of sight to it. The further you are from the router, the weaker the signal gets. The signal will penetrate plaster board walls reasonably well but if you live in an old house with solid internal walls, or indeed a modern apartment with reinforced concrete walls, the signal won't penetrate these particularly well.

That's enough theory. I hope some of you find it helpful and apologise to those who either already understand all of this or just don't want to know anything about it. **What do you need to do in practice?**

1. If you are in a position to connect your computer directly to your router, using an ethernet cable, this is the best solution of all, as you completely bypass your WiFi network. However, this is rarely convenient and you absolutely don't want a cable running across the floor for safety reasons, even if you could tolerate it aesthetically.
2. If you are relying on the router provided by your ISP, you need to be close to it – ideally in the same room.
3. If that's not feasible, you may need to upgrade your WiFi installation. There are essentially three ways to do this.
 - a. The simplest and cheapest is to buy a Powerline Adapter. This gadget plugs into a socket close to your router. It is connected to the router using an Ethernet cable. It distributes the signal using the electrical wiring in your home. You plug in a similar gadget in the room you want to extend the signal to.
 - b. A WiFi repeater picks up the WiFi signal from the router and rebroadcasts it. You put it in a location where the routers signal is still adequate and it extends the range of the signal.
 - c. The best solution, by far, is to install a Mesh Network in your home. It's not particularly complicated but it is expensive.
4. If you are using a mobile device, such as a tablet, to access BBO, find a place which has a stable internet signal and **stay there**. If you finish a round with several minutes

to spare and decide to wander around the house, don't bring the tablet with you. Why? Because unless you have a mesh network, there is every chance that you will walk through a part of your home which has little or no WiFi signal and the connection between your device and the BBO server will drop. We see this happening all the time!

5. Unless you have a really fast connection, beware that if someone else in your home starts streaming video over the wireless network, using the likes of Netflix; that may cause your connection to drop.
6. If you genuinely have a problem with your broadband signal (as opposed to your WiFi), consider using your smartphone as a mobile hotspot. This solution uses your phone to connect to the internet and you connect your computer to your phone using WiFi. Provided you have a decent signal on your phone (4G or better), and your phone is beside your laptop or tablet, it works just fine.

What to do if you become Disconnected from BBO

If you have gone wandering, go back to the part of your home where you have a decent signal. Log back onto BBO. When you reconnect, BBO will recognise you and take you automatically to the tournament. If you have only been out briefly (less than about a minute), you will be re-seated immediately and can simply continue playing. If you have been out of more than about a minute, the Director may well have replaced you with a robot, and you won't usually be re-seated until the end of the board (unless the robot is Dummy, in which case the Director may re-seat you sooner). If you have been missing for a longer period of time (5-10 minutes) and the robot has been replaced by a human substitute, the Director may well have made the human substitute permanent. This is particularly likely to be done if your signal has been fluctuation before you became fully disconnected (the Director can detect that). If your human substitute has been made permanent, you cannot get back into the tournament.

Aidan Synnott,
5/7/2020.