



Bridge Scoring Apps

by Barry Morrison

New electronic scoring software is able to run on common-or-garden smartphones and tablets. We asked one rural club to review a couple of the main contenders – the UK's home-grown BriAn and Jannersten's BridgeTabs.

Winscombe Bridge Club, in North Somerset, was perfectly placed. It has a weekly duplicate taking place in a community hall which has finally installed rural-paced Wi-Fi, and is relatively central in the county. But what really marked it out is Barry Morrison – a self-styled 'club geek' who enjoys tinkering with new technology and understands the finer points of bridge-scoring software. Luckily he was happy to put the two systems to the test, and write our review.

In order to really put the software through its paces Winscombe invited players from all clubs across the county with an interest in scoring. It made for a very jolly and social couple of evenings with lots of cross-county introductions, and drew representatives from the unaffiliated clubs who enjoyed seeing all the information available using electronic scoring and computer-dealt hands.

Here, Barry gives us his low-down on directing with each system, while a questionnaire completed by players provide the ratings (out of five).

BRIDGETABS

BridgeTabs uses a custom app, loaded through Google Play, onto either a standard Android tablet or a smartphone – not a dedicated piece of hardware. Each table has one tablet or smartphone (terminal) onto which North-South (by tradition) are responsible for entering the board number, contract, declarer, lead and result.

BridgeTabs works with the scoring program of your choice – PairsScorer, EBUScore, ScoreBridge and the one we use – KbScore – which is in essence a simplified version of PairsScorer. Each BridgeTab terminal communicates directly with the database using Wi-Fi or a local area network. If there is no internet you can use a 'dongle' on the computer that allows the tablets and computer to talk and score.

Results can then be uploaded to the EBU or put on the internet later (at home) when Wi-Fi is available. The scoring program is responsible for collecting results from the database and giving feedback to the terminals.

The players' screens on the BridgeTab terminal are intuitive. Players are prompted through the set-up to enter their table number and identities (either a club number or an EBU number will do). They are given their pair numbers. Instant feedback is given – the players' names are displayed – and any corrections can be made.

At the start of each round, the screen shows the player names and the boards. For each board North, by convention, enters the contract, declarer and, optionally, the lead. Facilities also exist for entering the bidding. At the end of play North enters the result and the score is shown for agreement by East. If okay, the equivalent of the board's traveller is displayed on screen. If the hands are known by the system the players also have the option to see the deal on screen, including the optimum result, but this can be turned off to ensure quick play.

At the end of the round a summary of each board played is shown and at this stage the players have the option to correct any mistakes before accepting 'end of round'. After this, only the director can make changes. If enabled, current rankings are shown, followed by a screen which shows where each pair should move. At the end of the session the final rankings can be made available for display.

BEFORE THE TRIAL – GETTING IT RIGHT

We tested the system before the trial and experienced some teething problems. We suffered from intermittent communication problems which appeared to be Wi-Fi related. It transpired that our tablets were not up to the task; they were fine individually but once there were four or more in operation we had problems. Eventually we bit the bullet and replaced our £30 tablets with Amazon ones costing around £50 each. Much to our treasurer's relief there have been no further

problems.

Tablets tend to ‘snooze’ while a hand is played to protect battery life. It is important to have tablets that revert straight to the last screen when ‘woken’ – we would advise against those that require you to scroll through a couple of ads first.

At the outset it was anticipated that we could have logistical problems in keeping the tablets’ batteries charged. This was solved by constructing a docking box as shown in the picture below. It holds twelve tablets housed in slots and contains a couple of six-way chargers. The box doubles up as both a charger and a convenient means of storing the tablets.



DIRECTING EXPERIENCE

Players can rectify their own mistakes on BridgeTab so there are few technical requirements from the director during the game. The facilities appear to cover all contingencies and are easy to use. It is a plus that you do not require internet. Many small village halls do not have Wi-Fi, but BridgeTabs can still run using a simple local area network. **Director rating: ✓✓✓✓✓ 5.0**



BridgeTab screenshots
Rated very clear and intuitive for users

PROS

- ✎ Runs on most scoring software allowing directors to choose one they are familiar with
- ✎ Clear and intuitive screens – almost no training required for users
- ✎ Does not need internet – a local area network is easy to set up

CONS

- ✎ On the ‘traveller’ screen the lead seems more prominent than the contract which is lost on the left hand side. It can be confusing. For instance, if the contract is 4♠ and the lead is ♥2, it looks like the contract is 2♥.
- ✎ Keeping tablets charged and storing them.

USER FEEDBACK

- Overall ease of use and success: ✓✓✓✓✓ 5.0
- Intuitive screens: ✓✓✓✓✓ 4.5
- Ease of reading screen: ✓✓✓✓✓ 4.7
- Better or worse than dedicated hardware system? Unanimously better ✓✓✓✓✓ 5.0
- Good solution for clubs? ✓✓✓✓✓ 5.0

USER COMMENTS

- ‘An excellent clear system’*
- ‘Tablets are very easy to read’*
- ‘As an ancient bridge player (80+) this modern technology is putting me off playing bridge.’*
- ‘Too many problems with needing router, computer, charging and space for equipment’*

BRIAN

BriAn (Bridge on Android) was developed by London’s Victor Lesk and Ned Paul. It also uses an app loaded onto a tablet or smartphone (either an Apple or Android device). It runs its own built-in bridge-scoring software. Several players in our test used their own smartphones which travel with the player rather than being left on the table, and clubs can thus avoid purchasing any hardware.

Rather than assigning a terminal to a specific table (obviously members would be reluctant to leave their expensive phone behind when they move to a different table!) the terminals can be assigned to a specific pair and move with them. As long as there is always one terminal at each table scoring can proceed. If several players are keeping score it is possible to enter a score on two or more terminals simultaneously.

Winscombe BC has several players who do not own smartphones and the club provided a few tables with tablets (the same ones as used for

BridgeTabs – both apps were installed). There was a mix of players taking their phone scorer with them, and tablets remaining with North at a particular table.

BriAn does not require a local computer. The scoring devices communicate directly with the BriAn website – brianbridge.net. A session of bridge can be completely set up and scored using smart phones and/or tablets, only requiring a computer if results are to be displayed on a central screen.

Before the session starts, the director creates a game, using any terminal which has been switched to director mode, entering the number of tables, movement etc. The players then switch on their own devices and initialise them with the club's gamecode and the appropriate pair number or table number. Either the director can create a database of players' names, or players can input them onto their own devices when the game has been created.

The contract, lead and result for each board is entered at the end of each deal. If more than one player at a table is scoring, the system automatically alerts if entries don't match. Players may rectify any mistakes up until they agree 'end of round'.

The 'BriAn menu' gives users the facility to refresh the device, enter director mode (password protected), show current rankings and re-assign the device to a different pair or table number. For instance if a table finds itself without a device, they can 'borrow' for a round.

BEFORE THE TRIAL

There were problems before the trial with the BriAn website, but once we'd been advised to use only the Google Chrome browser it worked well. It was also irritating to need to create a names database, but we are assured this has been fixed and players can enter an EBU number or type their own name on Android, and due soon on Apple.

DIRECTING EXPERIENCE

No problems were experienced, with players needing little, if any, tuition on the use of the terminals. However, with our 'rural-paced' broadband we did have some trouble staying connected to the website. Devices often had communication problems with the server.

We used both tablets and smartphones. There was an overwhelming feeling that the tablets were much easier to use, and the smartphones were fiddly.

The built-in scoring software seemed perfectly adequate, but directors familiar with other systems may resent the lack of choice.

Director rating: ✓✓✓✓/4.5

PROS

Runs on phones and tablets with everyone and anyone welcome to keep score, so leaning over to see percentages and previous results on a single device is not an issue.

Runs on the internet, not on a local network, so excellent for bridge at multiple sites such as café bridge.

Cheap option for irregular users as no capital outlay.

Very good for an individual who runs infrequent duplicates, perhaps in classes, and the odd charity event as it requires no outlay on hardware.

Clear and intuitive screens – almost no training required for users.

CONS

Runs on built-in scoring software which seems good, but directors must familiarise themselves with it.

If you have no tablets, you must ask players to download software and use their own phones.

Players must arrive with fully-charged phones, and if there is no Wi-Fi, must have sufficient data allowance.

Full and strong internet access is essential.

USER FEEDBACK

Overall ease of use and success: ✓✓✓✓/4.3

For those using their own phones:

Ease of software installation & set-up ✓✓✓✓/5.0

Intuitive screens: ✓✓✓/3.4

Ease of reading screen: ✓✓✓✓/4.4

Better than dedicated hardware? ✓✓✓✓✓/5.0

Good solution for clubs? ✓✓✓✓✓/5.0

For those using tablets:

Intuitive screens: ✓✓✓✓/4.7

Ease of reading screen: ✓✓✓✓✓/5.0

Better than dedicated hardware? ✓✓✓✓✓/5.0



BriAn screens – you can keep your own score

USER COMMENTS

'If BriAn is cheaper than alternative hardware options you should 100% switch. It would be VERY SIMPLE to use next time!'

'This is the future'

'Better because with other systems only the operator knows, more or less, what's going on. With one's own phone, all is made clear'

'Brilliant – far better than Bridgemates'

'Tablets better than phones. Would be OK after some use. Harder for IT phobics.'

'My only problem related to the small size of the phone screen – BriAn on a tablet is much easier.'

QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION

Q We don't have Wi-Fi at our club. Can either system be used without it?

A BridgeTab relies on Wi-Fi for communication to and from the scoring terminals. However, an internet connection is not required and hence Wi-Fi can be provided by a simple stand-alone Wi-Fi Router which can be obtained for as little as £20. We have used this in the past with 100% success.

BriAn communicates via the internet. Smartphones can connect directly to the internet and thus do not require Wi-Fi (if the 3G/4G signal is good) but if tablets are used for some or all of the scoring terminals then Wi-Fi with an internet connection is required. Some smartphones can be set up as a 'Wi-Fi Hotspot' but the signal needs to be excellent.

Q Is a licence required and if so how much?

A Yes. BridgeTab charges £6 per table per year - a small club with a maximum of ten tables would pay £60 per year and could run as many sessions as they wished each week.

BriAn's annual charge is £15 per weekly table, assuming 24-board games - so a club with two five-table games weekly would pay £150. This rises slightly with more boards, but there is a 'cap' of £180 for any one club. For one-off or irregular events, credits can be bought online at a higher ad-hoc rate, starting at 3p per traveller line for events less than 10 tables, rising to 7p for more than 30 tables. Some examples are given in the 'Cost of ownership' table below.

Q What happens with BridgeTab if one gets more tables than the licence allows?

A The controlling software will not allow you to activate more terminals than your licence allows but as long as you have an internet connection and a credit card a top up licence can be purchased pretty much instantaneously. The extra licence can be short term and is proportionally cheaper (£1 per table for thirty days).

Q Similarly, what happens with BriAn if you don't have sufficient credit at the start of a session?

A That shouldn't happen as you will be warned when your balance is less than 1000 credits, nevertheless, extra credit can be purchased without delay.

COST OF OWNERSHIP

The table shows a quick look at the total cost over a five-year period for a) a small club, ten table maximum, running one session per week with an average of seven tables and b) a larger club, twenty table maximum, running two sessions per week with an average of fifteen tables. Bridgemates are included for comparison. The figures do not include equipment such as a laptop, projector, dealing machine. While a laptop or computer is essential for Bridgemates and Bridgetabs, it is not essential for BriAn except to project results. In theory BridgeTabs can be used on personal smartphones, but in practice this is unlikely given players would have to leave their phone with North at the table they started. No allowance has been made for hardware depreciation, which should be considered with Bridgemates and tablets.

	Small Club			Larger Club		
	Bridgemate	BridgeTab	BriAn	Bridgemate	BridgeTab	BriAn
Capital cost	£1,665	£600 ¹	–	£2,975	£1,100 ²	–
5-year licence	–	£300 ³	£750 - £900 ⁴	–	£600	£900 ⁵
Total	£1665	£900	£750 - £900	£2,975	£1,700	£900

¹ 12 tablets (2 spare) at £50 each. While players using BridgeTabs can bring their own phones or tablets, it seems unviable given they have to be left with North at the table where they started. ² 22 tablets (2 spare) at £50 each.

³ 10 tables at £6 per table, per year. ⁴ 10 tables at £15 per table. The lower range is for up to 24 boards a session.

⁵ Cap on costs payable by club.