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Bridge Big

Una money alternativa a BBO?

Zia Mahmood with Bridge Big creators Nira Talova and Rene De Waele.

Bridge Big, backed by Zia, strives to 'spice up' bridge

Few people approach bridge with the same passion that Zia Mahmood does, so when he seems extra excited about a new bridge project, it's probably wise to pay attention. What Zia is touting is a new startup company called Bridge Big, the brainchild of Rene De Waele and Nira Talova, a married couple who live in Rotterdam, Netherlands. Their dream is to have online bridge games for money – very big money in some cases, up to $100,000.

"We want to spice up bridge," says De Waele, who has a PhD in physics but is more involved in software startups and bridge. Talova has a master's degree in business administration specializing in entrepreneurship. Says De Waele, "I have always played online poker, but I like bridge much more. It is a much better game." Zia loves the idea of online play for big stakes: "It's a fantastic concept."

The playing model, say De Waele, is like online poker, and the prize money will come from the entry fees. The more people playing, the larger the potential payoff. "Poker is booming," Zia notes, "but bridge is not. Why? The answer is simple – money!"

The allure of Bridge Big's idea is that a person could enter a bridge tournament for $20

and win $100,000. Prizes won't all be that big, but the Bridge Big creators and Zia are hoping that competition for cash prizes will attract more interest from the public and the news media, giving bridge a shot in the arm.

The company will begin a testing phase next month and plan to roll out the finished product during the summer, possibly in July. There will be a demo match on Friday at 11 a.m. in the Breathitt Room in the Suite Tower, second floor. Bridge Big will award three $100 cash prizes to spectators in a drawing. Players are also invited to become beta testers for Bridge Big. Information is available on the home page: www.bridgebig.com

An obvious concern, acknowledged by the Bridge Big creators and Zia, is security (translation: cheating). They have already thought of that. To assure that no player gains an unfair advantage, all competitions will be individuals, one board per round with an unknown partner against unknown opponents (all such information will be revealed when the contest is over). No kibitzers are allowed, and the scoring will be duplicate but not against the field. The comparisons will be against the "history" of a deal that may have been played hundreds of times previously.
This is what the Bridge Big creators have written about security on the company web site:

Security

Anywhere there's real money at stake, people will look for ways to cheat. On Bridge Big, this will be no different. Bridge Big is committed to prevent any kind of cheating on its site.
On bridge sites today it is very easy to cheat because players are allowed to see who their partners are. The only way to deal with this security issue is by playing individually and anonymously. As an extra measure, players will not be allowed to chat with their partners during a game, although they may still talk to their opponents. Even if players somehow find out who they're partnering with, they can only benefit from this for one board, after which they're split up again. However, even when players are not each other's partners they may still try to exchange information about their hand to other players in the tournament. To prevent this type of collusion, players cannot see what direction they sit at the table and what board they're playing.

The vulnerability at the table will also give no clue as all simultaneously played games in a tournament share the same vulnerability and dealer combination. The limited time players have for one board also limits the feasibility for players to exchange useful information. Only after a board

has been played by everyone in the field will a user be able to see all four complete hands.

In smaller tournament settings, these measures might still not prove sufficient. Although seating schedules on Bridge Big will never allow two or more tables to be playing the same board simultaneously, players could still leak information about previously played boards to each other. In larger tournaments this is less of a threat as players will be divided over multiple sections, each with a unique set of boards, hindering player collusion significantly as collaborating players will be seated in different sections for most of the tournament.

In smaller tournaments or in the final rounds of a large knockout tournament it would be preferable if boards are only played exactly once. Scores would be compared not to other players in the tournament, but to all players that ever played the board before in previous tournaments. Aside from thwarting colluders, this measure has an additional advantage: it provides players with a fairer score, as their results are compared to hundreds of other players, instead of only the handful that are in the tournament.

To top it off, Bridge Big will constantly be tracking connections between users on the site to prevent any long-term cheating. If two users happen to frequently play in the same tournament, they will at one point be prevented from joining the same tournament. On poker sites, a similar strategy is applied successfully. In case users have any personal information like address, e-mail address or bank accounts in common, they are never permitted to play in the same tournament.

Bridge Big draws positive comments

The founders of Bridge Big have some big dreams, the most ambitious of which is to organize Internet bridge tournaments for serious-money cash prizes. A demonstration at the Galt House Hotel on Friday didn't draw as well as founders Rene De Waele and Nira Talova had hoped – and there were some problems with Internet connections – but they remain optimistic that they will succeed in giving bridge a shot in the arm. One of their most enthusiastic proponents is Zia Mahmood, who took part in the demo and proclaimed afterward that other players who showed up "gave us some very positive feedback." Zia believes that the cash-prize aspect of the Bridge Big plan will take bridge to where poker is now – or at least pretty close.

The demo, he said, "was the beginning. They will solve the technical thing." De Waele and Talova, who are married, plan to start beta testing of the online game in mid-April. Through Friday, they had signed up 150 testers through an appeal in the Daily Bulletin.

If you are interested in being a tester, visit bridgebig.com for more information.

Zia said the success of the effort will boil down to "the way you score it and security. If the security is handled, it will work." Bridge Big's developers have invested a lot of time drawing up a system to protect the field fromplayers who might want to take unfair advantage.

As outlined in the Daily Bulletin on Thursday (issue No. 7), the security system is solid. "We want to lower the chance of cheating to near zero," said De Waele. "There is a solution that people can live with." Talova pointed out that playing on Bridge Big, which is browser-based, requires no downloads or anything more than just going to bridgebig.com.

De Waele said the beta phase will include some cash-prize tournaments. Bridge Big is expected to go online for official business some time during the summer. They are working toward having a total prize purse of $30,000 for the top finishers in the debut tournament. Down the road, if all goes well, the winning player in one of their tournaments may take home $100,000 or more.

De Waele said the idea for Bridge Big entered his mind 10 years ago, mostly because he was bored with playing poker online – and considers bridge a vastly superior game. The idea was to find a way to give bridge the same allure that poker has.

De Waele and Talova are hoping players will offer constructive criticism and suggestions for improving the product .

Bridge Big founders Nira Talova and Rene De Waele.

Players and kibitzers at the Bridge Big demonstration on Friday at the Galt House Hotel.

About Bridge Big

Bridge Big is a start up founded in The Netherlands committed to making online bridge the most exciting activity on the web. We are very passionate about the game and fear that it's dying of old age. We believe that playing bridge needs to always be exciting, and that every match should count, kind of like it was in the glory days when bridge was played for money. We believe that bridge is already the best card game in the world. What's missing is the poker element, i.e. the rush of winning substantial prizes and the cool and glamorous image this brings to the game.

With the future of bridge in mind, we are introducing a modern platform that enables you to play in exciting bridge events and win significant money prizes as in online poker. The stakes are unlimited. We're designing the platform to run in the browser of any internet device, ranging from desktop computers to smart phones and tablets.

Zia Mahmood, one of the world's most charismatic and best-known bridge players, is so excited about the concept that he has decided to join our team as platform ambassador. *Zia:*

> *Poker succeeded to attract millions of players. Small investments with huge rewards. We can do the same in bridge, especially when you take in consideration that bridge is much more fun to play than poker.*

In the coming months we will need your help with beta testing the platform in anticipation of the official launch this summer. Right now the product is still pretty bare bones, but this will change a lot during the beta while we release all sorts of exciting features. To read more about the envisioned features and how we will deal with security click **here**.