Feel like a bit of you-know-what?
The quiet passion that took off during lockdown

Who knew bridge was so competitive, so fraught – so intoxicatingly fun?
The hordes who are flocking to play during lockdown, that's who.

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Immersed in the manifold horrors of lockdown, we do what we must to survive. For many of us, that involves a hobby: either a new one, or an old one taken to hitherto undreamt of heights. There are the pandemic pet people, the sourdough tragics (of whom I am the most tragic of all), the wine club weirdos, the Netflix junkies, the crazy crafters. And, unbeknownst to the rest of the world, there are also the bridge addicts, quietly (and not so quietly) meeting triumph and disaster over the bridge table every hour of the day and night, global scourge be damned.

This microcosm of COVID-19 life was recently revealed by a friend who is a bridge player herself: an award-winning investigative journalist who confessed that in lockdown she has been playing bridge almost every day, and dreaming about it at night. She wanted to talk more about her compulsion, but she couldn't, because she was about to play bridge with a Supreme Court judge, a filmmaker and a QC.

Wait! I said. You need four people, all gathered round a small table, all stationery, and usually indoors, to play bridge. On what grounds can you possibly pretend you're exercising? "It's all online!" she cried. Then she hung up.

She wasn't the only one. As it turns out, it's extremely difficult to talk to anyone about playing bridge during lockdown, because everyone is, in fact, playing bridge. I call Di Jagelman, a Sydney society doyenne with a lovely warm voice. Her first words are: "Hullo? I've got to play a card! Oh no! Oh no!"

I'm calling about bridge, I say. Shall I call you back?

"Yes! It's my turn, oh no!" She hangs up.

Then I call Prue White*, a gregarious Sydney businesswoman. I'm calling about bridge, I say again.

“Oh darl! It’s so perfect, I’m playing bridge right now!” she says. “And I’m playing again at 4.30 and again at 7! I’ve told my son we’re getting takeaway for dinner! Ooops – it’s me!”

I’ll call tomorrow, I say. “Yes! Perfect! Yes, I know it’s me.” She hangs up.

Joan Butts is the Australian Bridge Federation’s national teaching co-ordinator and has represented Australia as a player. In 2017, she founded her own online bridge school, joanbuttsbridge.com. Oh yes, she says apologetically: bridge people are hopelessly distracted during games. (Butts herself once played an entire tournament without realising she was in labour – i.e. in the actual process of having a baby – that’s how focused she was on the game. After winning the tournament, she put down her cards, went to hospital, and swiftly gave birth to her son Tom.)

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But even she admits COVID has taken bridgemania to a whole new level. People who formerly played once or twice a week – occasionally, socially, at dinner parties when they were “tired of making conversation but didn’t want to go home”, as one player put it to me – are suddenly playing every day, sometimes multiple times a day.

“My subscription base grew by 50 per cent in a single month in April last year,” Butts says. “And we’ve doubled our membership [since the start of the pandemic].”

Bridge is surprisingly good both to learn and to play online, apparently. “You don’t have to be nearly so polite,” says Butts. “You can run around your apartment screaming with rage, and nobody knows.”

The game has been online for decades, but it took a global pandemic to truly energise it there.

“More than two-thirds of our members are now playing online,” says Liam Milne, manager of Sydney’s North Shore Bridge Club, the largest bridge club in Australia. “And the most frequent players are playing up to 10 times a week; so that’s multiple times a day.”

In Melbourne, as a direct result of COVID, bridge teacher Laura Ginnan and husband Peter Hollands (“Yes, we met playing bridge,” says Ginnan, “of course we did”) established the first 100 per cent Australian-owned online playing platform, realdealbridge.com, last year. “And we quadrupled our player base this August alone” – when both Sydney and Melbourne were in lockdown.

There's also the great behemoth of online bridge, Bridge Base Online (BBO), an American site formerly part-owned by Bill Gates. Gates is a keen player, and often partners his good mate, investment billionaire Warren Buffett. As BBO's Alexandra Quintin explains, the site now has "160,000 daily log-ins compared with 100,000 in January 2020. One day we had more than 90,000 players logged in and playing all at once!"

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"I've become obsessed," admits television producer Penny Chapman. She and some friends have been playing for three years, and "we're still pretty terrible".

But thanks to all the COVID-play, one of her group recently got to three points on the BBO ranking system. This isn't very high, but even so, all of Chapman's competitive instincts rose to the fore: "I immediately decided I must get to three, too. I was like a crazy woman. I was playing in tournament after tournament; I'd go to bed and have these visions of hands flashing through my head. And I didn't get to three. In the end I had to go cold turkey – then I got totally sledged by everyone, telling me I needed bridge AA: 'My name is Penny and I am an inveterate underbidder.' "

Addiction notwithstanding, "Bridge has saved our lives during COVID," says Judy Crawford, board member (of the Australian Chamber Orchestra), ambassador (of the Sydney Dance Company) and inveterate bridge player (in London and Paris, as well as Australia). "We play online five or six times a week at the moment. It's a godsend." But not necessarily one calculated to increase domestic harmony. "I've had two husbands [millionaire businessman Ian Joye, and the late Macquarie Bank co-founder Robin Crawford] who played bridge. I thought it could be something we would do together. And then I thought perhaps not."

"It can be very delicate," agrees Butts: especially if your partner is also your, well, partner. "You need great sensitivity, yet it's a very aggressive game. People become very disturbed with each other."

John Roberts, former bridge pro and founder, in 1987, of Bridgetoday.com.au, describes one bridge-partner couple he knows who have found online bridge far preferable to the face-to-face version. "They play on devices in separate rooms, and the husband said it's much more relaxing now, because his wife can't look at him."

Still, sometimes even separate rooms aren't enough. The first house Prue White ever bought – long before COVID – was the result of a divorce caused by bridge.

“After the auction I went up to the man who’d sold the place and said, ‘Oh, it’s such a lovely house, why did you sell?’ ” she recalls. “And he said, ‘My wife discovered bridge.’”

White learnt to play with some friends almost a decade ago. They used to all get together once a month, but since COVID things have escalated. “I’ll be lying in bed watching the telly, and my phone will ping and it’s someone saying, ‘Feel like a bit of you-know-what?’ And in five minutes we’ll be playing; and at midnight we’ll be like, ‘It’s getting a bit late,’ and at 2am someone will say, ‘I really must go to bed.’”

Rather like Fight Club, no one outside Bridge Club really understands what the hell’s going on inside Bridge Club. “All the husbands are like, ‘What are you lot doing?’” says White. ”‘You can’t just be playing bridge.’ But we are!”

Of course, sometimes it’s not only the game people feel passionate about. “Lots of people have bolted with their bridge pros,” says Di Jagelman. “They’re the ski instructors of old ladies. They do something you like doing much better than you can do it.” She has a friend who did exactly that, in fact. Did it improve her bridge? Jagelman laughs. “Not markedly.”

Of course, playing online presumably makes romance slightly less likely, if only because everybody’s preoccupied with technology as well as their partners (and their cards). But some people have been playing online for years. “My international bridge career has been underway for some time!” laughs charity queen Skye Leckie. “It started because I’m such a terrible player. I had to go on lots of sites, and have all these different aliases, because if I went back to the same site with the same name, people would refuse to play with me!”

Nonetheless, there’s also a certain frisson to playing with strangers. One woman I talk to was once partnered online by someone who turned out to be playing from jail. “The thing was,” she says, “he was terribly helpful. He kept saying, ‘Oh, don’t play that card,’ and ‘Well done!’ It was terrific.”

“Yes!” says Prue White, who has heard this story. “I think he was a murderer!”

History does not relate whether his victim was his bridge partner, but bridge murder has occurred at least once: Myrtle Bennett, of Kansas City, fatally shot her husband after he played a hand that lost them a game with their neighbours one evening in 1929. Though she chased him through the apartment with a semi-automatic pistol, shot at him four times, and hit him twice in front of witnesses, killing him at the scene, Myrtle Bennett was acquitted. It’s unclear how many bridge players were on the jury.

For most people, however, bridge is a lifesaver rather than the reverse. “Oh my god, it has saved my sanity,” says Di Jagelman. “I play at least four or five times a week – more in lockdown.”

Some years ago, she even played at the American Spring Nationals. During that contest, she and her partner played multiple other partnerships, including one pair – elderly, grey-haired, pleasantly nondescript – who proved, on closer inspection, to be … guess who? Warren Buffett and Bill Gates.

Oh my god, Di, I say: you were playing two men with a combined wealth measured in the hundreds of billions; the most legendary
investor and the greatest philanthropist in history! “But they weren’t that good at bridge,” says Jagelman calmly. “I think they won one hand and we won one.”

Which just goes to show. In bridge, anything is possible.