

Computers Are Evil - Book Review

By Jared Johnson
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*Computers are bad.
Computers are evil.*

Don't believe me? Read *Human Bridge Errors, Volume One of Infinity*, collected and analyzed by the bridge playing computer, Chthonic, and edited by humans Danny Kleinman and Nick Straguzzi (Master Point Press of Toronto).

This is another book for serious intermediate and advanced players and often focuses on neglected topics. Among the considerations: Undervaluing ace - jack - ten sequences.

Blindly "staying with the field" at matchpoint pairs. It isn't always right to look for the normal contract. (This, of course, runs contrary to the common wisdom of bidding normally, getting to the normal contract, and picking up your matchpoints in the play.)

Needlessly avoiding minor suit contracts. Notrump isn't always right, even at matchpoints.

Using conventions that rarely come up. Chthonic doesn't care for splinter bids and prefers strong jump shifts to the more popular (near universal) weak jump shifts. But, of course, most humans don't consult him before filling out their convention cards.

And in condemning conventions such as Two-Way Reverse Drury (doesn't the name itself sound like an accident waiting to happen?), Chthonic cautions, "Some bidding agreements are not worth adopting, regardless of their popularity."

Most of the instruction is in the context of stories that are entertaining in their own right.

However, Chthonic is downright brutal when it comes to criticism of humans.

The table of contents is riddled with terms such as inferior, mistaking, inconsistent, overuse, erroneous, failure, overlooking, mishandling, incorrect, ignoring, oblivious, and the like. Mean.

In the author's introduction, Chthonic introduces himself. "Greetings. I am an artificially intelligent automaton developed at the Orttman Foundation for Scientific Foundation, specializing in the game of contract bridge.

"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 e-mail."

He then starts in on us. "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."

There is much to learn from this book if you can stand such an overbearing tutor.

And finally, Chthonic intones, "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."

Careful, Chthonic, or we'll unplug you.