

Jeremy Claptrap and the Hoogli Bridge Player Entrant

This year's World Computer Bridge Championship was spiced with mystery as an entry from New Zealand turned out to be an imposter. Stephen Smith and the Bridge Baron team have sleuthed the puzzle and their presentation can be found on this page. See also: Matt Ginsberg and Hoogli. Source: <http://www.greatbridgelinks.com/GBLArchives/GBL010709.html>

The Curious Case of "Jeremy Claptrap"

As lead programmer for Bridge Baron, I have witnessed an unusual situation that developed in connection with the 2001 Funbridge.com World Computer Bridge Championship, sponsored by the American Contract Bridge League and held in Toronto, Ontario, Canada on 23-28 July 2001. To protect the sanctity of bridge in general and of computer bridge in particular, I feel compelled to describe the facts of the case as they are known to me.

On 10 April 2001, "Jeremy Claptrap" joined the family of computer bridge programmers by sending an email that began:

Dear Sirs (and Madams):

Please allow me to introduce myself; my name is Jeremy Claptrap and I have created a bridge player named Hoogli. Hoogli will be participating, I hope, in the world computer bridge championships to be held in Toronto.

This, in itself, was not particularly unusual, as the family of computer bridge programmers seems to grow every year. Hans Kuijf joined the family in September 2000, and Yves Costel joined the family in January 2000. It is possible for a single programmer, after a couple of years of work, to produce a computer bridge player that will hold its own against the more established programs that make up the field at the world computer bridge championships.

This introductory email message from "Jeremy Claptrap" was sent from the Hotmail account jclaptrap@hotmail.com and was signed:

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy Claptrap

Christchurch, New Zealand

Over the next two months, "Jeremy Claptrap" participated from time to time in the email discussions leading up to the championship, always using "his" Hotmail account. These discussions mostly focused on the implementations of interfaces to connect Table Manager, the automatic match-running program created by Ian Trackman and Mike Whittaker, to the programs of the various entrants.

The competitors discussed the distribution of crippled versions of their programs -- with fully functional Table Manager interfaces, but with less than their best bidding and play routines. Many of the competitors felt that distributing the latest and best versions of their programs would put them at a competitive disadvantage. "Jeremy Claptrap" did not fully agree, writing on 12 June 2001:

With regard to the test programmes, it is unfortunately not clear to me that a weakened version of Hoogli could accurately be described as playing bridge. My goal in the time remaining between now and the Toronto tournament is to make Hoogli better, not worse! In any event, however, I will be grateful for any opportunity to test Hoogli against the other programmes ("crippled" or otherwise). If it manages to overcome a competing programme that is playing in a weakened state, I shall simply enjoy my moment in the sun and steel myself for disappointment in Canada.

In fact, on 15 June 2001, "Jeremy Claptrap" sent out a test version of his program, Hoogli, writing:

I am attaching a version of Hoogli that can, with luck, be used to test the TM programme. I have attempted to perform tests myself using the software that others have kindly made available, and have had rather mixed results.

This test version of Hoogli, which will play an important role later in our story, seemed to be a reasonably competent bridge bidder and player.

The next interesting email message in our story was sent by Matt Ginsberg on 22 June 2001, in which he withdrew GIB from the world computer bridge championship. (To use his character-for-character phrasing, he said that there would be no "GIB" entry in the championship.) In his message, Matt cited two reasons: possible time conflicts, and concerns about the fairness of the contest. However, Matt did mention that he would be in Toronto for the championship, and predicted that he would choose one of the new programs to cheer for, so that he might have a rooting interest.

This withdrawal was also, in itself, not unusual, as Matt had also withdrawn GIB from the Maastricht world computer bridge championship, citing time conflicts. In fact, with Matt's blessing, Rod Ludwig and Dave Walker used GIB's engine in Maastricht for declarer play and defense in their program.

Strangely, though, this email message from Matt showed up on my computer with an intact BCC line: "BCC: ron@otsys.com". Matt sent this email message from usually.otsys.com, also known as usually.cirl.oregon.edu. Later investigation suggested that this intact BCC line may have resulted because usually.otsys.com was running Exim 3.22 partly as an MUA (Mail User Agent), rather than solely as an MTA (Mail Transport Agent), and was omitting the -t option, which removes BCC lines.

On 3 July 2001, "Jeremy Claptrap" sent a surprising email message:

It is with the greatest regret that I must inform you that I may be unable to attend the Toronto championship in person.

As I have already told Dr. Ludwig, the political turmoil of the early 1930's found me engaged in activities for His Majesty's government that required certain official documents to be falsified in order that my true allegiances might be disguised. After the war erupted, it became ever more vital that the deception be maintained, and when the war concluded, there seemed little profit and much risk in correcting the situation.

Unfortunately, certain of these documents have recently been unearthed by the Mossad, and I am no longer in a position to question their authenticity with any real credibility. As a New Zealander, I need no visa for travel to Canada, but my few remaining contacts inform me that there is a real chance of my being detained at the border were I to attempt the journey.

While I am continuing in my attempts to resolve this matter in quiet ways, there is, as I commented earlier, every chance that no resolution is to be had. Rest assured that Hoogli will still participate in the hands of my grandson (who does not, alas, play bridge). My own attendance is, however, in considerable doubt; should Ron need to attend in my stead, I am confident that you will be pleased to exchange the quiet serenity of an old man for the boundless exuberance of a young one.

Hoping nevertheless that I shall be able to make the voyage and enjoy the pleasure of meeting all of you in person, I am,

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy Claptrap

The family of computer bridge programmers has its interesting characters. We include a physician and an attorney, and three finite element analysis engineers. We come from three continents, with English, German, Dutch, Japanese, French, and Bulgarian as our native tongues. But a former spy would perhaps be the most interesting character yet -- if his story was to be believed. Many of us, as it later turned out, had our suspicions at the time; I myself mentioned the story with skepticism to several friends who actually do work in intelligence for Uncle Sam's government.

Fortunately for "Jeremy Claptrap", Matt Ginsberg came to his rescue, writing a message on 6 July 2001 in which he offered to help Ron, the "grandson" of "Jeremy Claptrap". After all, as Matt put it with some understatement, he understands both bridge and computers.

At Great Game Products, we continued to prepare Bridge Baron for the championship. Then, on 17 July 2001, George Yanakiev, the Bridge Baron programmer who was coding the Bridge Baron interface to Table Manager, made a startling discovery.

George investigated the test version of Hoogli, and found that it contained two executables: one, called ganges.exe, served as the interface to Table Manager; and the other, called bridge.exe, actually did the bidding and play. But this bridge.exe striking similarities to the bridge.exe that ships as part of GIB: the format of the hand it takes as input, the format of the bidding

interpretation, the error messages for illegal calls and plays and random input, even the use of the command 'y' for concessions.

George brought these similarities to my attention. Because the integrity of the competition was at stake, I immediately contacted Al Levy, the Coordinator of the championship, and he agreed that the situation merited concern. He mentioned that Hans Kuijf had previously expressed some suspicions about Hoogli. Al said that he would look into the matter.

Later that day, "Jeremy Claptrap" sent two more email messages, included here:

Dear Fellow Toronto participants:

Ron will be leaving tomorrow (Thursday) for Toronto, flying into Vancouver and then driving across Canada. He will have with him a copy of the Hoogli CD, which has been tested against Mr. Trackman's most recent version of the Table Manager programme. He will also have with him the source code for Hoogli's interface to the TM programme, although since this interface is too large to fit on a single floppy, it is unclear whether he will be able to change the interface should the need arise.

Since Ron does not play bridge, there are several things that he will be unable to do in Toronto. He will be unable to change the speed at which Hoogli plays without modifying the interface programme; I have tested four copies of Hoogli against the Table Manager programme and they collectively play each deal in about three minutes, which should be well within the conditions set out by Mr. Levy. I must advise you all, however, that differing versions of Mr. Trackman's programme have reported substantially different running times for Hoogli, although Hoogli itself has been unchanged.

Ron will also be unable to keep score, although I trust that he will have ample assistance in this area. Perhaps more importantly, he will be unable to explain the meaning of any of Hoogli's bids or other actions. I have attempted to ensure that Hoogli explains all of its alertable bids using the protocol described by Mr. Trackman, although it will obviously be impossible for Ron to modify Hoogli's output should the need arise. Hoogli itself will play using the Table Manager's "automatic" setting.

Finally, Ron will be unable to make adjustments should any of your programmes not play in accordance with the convention card information that you have distributed. I have incorporated all of that information into Hoogli, and made the best guesses I am able with regard to Mr. Bannion's Bridge Buff programme.

I have asked Ron to email me the results of each day's play in the evening; due to the time difference between Toronto and New Zealand, I will be able to make modifications either as needed by other participants or to correct some of Hoogli's more glaring deficiencies. I can then have a new version of the programme back to Ron before the start of the next day's play. This is allowed by Mr. Levy's conditions as I understand them.

Other than collecting the play records, it is my hope that Ron has very little to do in Toronto, and that Dr. Ginsberg's kind offer of assistance is largely unneeded. With regard to Dr. Ginsberg himself, I note with great regret that a subset of this mailing list appears to be being used for personal attacks against him. Whatever you may think of his manners or public comments, echoing those manners in private can hardly be the appropriate response.

I wish you all well, and send my deepest regrets that I shall not be joining you in person.

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy Claptrap

It should be pointed out that the drive from Vancouver to Toronto is about 2700 miles (about 4300 kilometers).

Dear Mr. Levy:

Thank you for your recent message. As I expect you have already surmised from my message to the entire list, I shall unfortunately be unable to attend the event in person.

It is in fact only with the greatest reluctance that I am permitting Ron to attend as my representative. As you are doubtless aware, the Israelis are justifiably tireless in their pursuit of any individuals they believe to have been involved in the atrocities of the last century, and I find myself increasingly concerned for my own safety and, more important, for that of my family. It is a long and difficult trail that the Mossad is attempting to unravel, my only daughter having married and changed names long ago. But if they continue to operate with even a fraction of the efficiency of the organization I have known, unravel it they may.

For these reasons, I must, with all respect, decline to provide you with an address, telephone number, or other contact information. In the unlikely event that Hoogli wins a prize in the tournament, please donate the money to the ACBL junior team on my behalf.

In fact, I fear that I must impose on your consideration further still, asking that all of the participants agree to make no inquiries regarding Ron's background or identity. Without such a commitment on your joint behalf, I fear that it would be imprudent for me to allow him to attend.

If you are unwilling for Hoogli to participate under these conditions, I will completely understand. My service long ago to king and country was unconditional, and even if this matter should be added to the price that I have been compelled to pay over the years, that price is one I pay gladly.

I remain,

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy Claptrap

I continued to look into the "Jeremy Claptrap" matter myself. "Jeremy Claptrap" was supposedly a New Zealander of about 90 years of age. But his email messages were all sent between 12:57 am and 5:12 pm New Zealand time, and all but two were sent between 2:26 am and 2:29 pm New Zealand time -- five between 2:26 am and 4:27 am. These appeared to be rather unusual times; it seemed more likely that "Jeremy Claptrap" was significantly to the east or to the west of New Zealand.

"Jeremy Claptrap" made what seemed to me to be some unusual language and spelling choices for a 90-year-old New Zealander, though I know little about regional variations in English. He used "while" 2 times and never used "whilst"; he used "programme" 11 times, but slipped and used "program" twice.

The next day, on 18 July 2001, Al Levy sent a general email message informing "Jeremy Claptrap" that he would be unable to "agree to make no inquiries regarding Ron's background or identity". Later in the day, Hans Kuijf stated his belief that the bridge.exe that Hoogli uses is GIB's.

"Jeremy Claptrap" sent "his" last email message later that day:

Dear Toronto Participants:

How extraordinary. Mr. Levy, I suggest you find a copy of the November 1939 Bridge World (among others). You shall find me there. How curious that information that satisfied Mr. Culbertson is insufficient for you.

No, Jeremy Claptrap is not my real name. Nor was it in 1939. It is simply the name by which the bridge world has known me for sixty years. It is a name that I have come to love, representing as it does my connection with the game that I love and that I first learned so long ago.

Now, I am simply an old man, living a quiet life in a secluded place. The battles and challenges of my life are principally behind me, and I have little desire to resume them. Ron is in fact already on his way to Canada, but I shall recall him.

For those of you who welcomed me into this community, I thank you, and hope that you will stay in touch. For those of you who did not, I wish you the best of luck in your future endeavours and bear you no ill will. You, as I, are the product of your times.

I am, as ever,

Sincerely yours,

Jeremy Claptrap

The November 1939 Bridge World includes a brief humor piece, "Hoogli on Bridge Etiquette", written by a "Jeremy Claptrap". (Thanks to Janet Kinzer for this information.)

Finally, Matt Ginsberg sent an email message to "Jeremy Claptrap" and several other recipients, which was forwarded to me. In it, Matt mentioned his belief that "Jeremy Claptrap" did not want Matt looking at the list of people who had GIB source code in any detail. So Matt proposed an exchange. "Jeremy Claptrap" was to tell Matt how he got the GIB source code; "Jeremy Claptrap" was to guarantee to Matt that without Matt's permission, "Jeremy Claptrap" would not use the source code for anything else; and "Jeremy Claptrap" was to provide to Matt a copy of the source code for Hoogli so that Matt could reliably connect to Table Manager. For Matt's part, he said that if "Jeremy Claptrap" fulfilled these three conditions, Matt would view the matter as closed.

In Toronto, I was shown an email message in which Matt reported that the exchange with "Jeremy Claptrap" had taken place. Yet the matter was not entirely closed, as we made one more startling discovery after returning to Maryland.

On 31 July 2001, Bob Pizzuti, the Bridge Baron technical support specialist, pointed out that Hotmail includes an X-Originating-IP line on every email message sent out from Hotmail. Thus for every email message that "Jeremy Claptrap" sent, Hotmail informed all the recipients of the IP address of the computer that "Jeremy Claptrap" was using.

In sixteen email messages, the IP address of the computer that "Jeremy Claptrap" was using was 128.223.40.72. In eight messages, the IP address of the computer that "Jeremy Claptrap" was using was 128.223.40.46. In two messages, it was 63.187.196.20, and there was one message each from 199.174.223.78 and 63.187.192.237. (See below for a link to the complete transcript of the email messages of "Jeremy Claptrap".)

Here are the name-server reports on each of these IP's, as well as the name-server report on usually.otsys.com:

Name: usually.cirl.uoregon.edu
Address: 128.223.40.72

Name: then.cirl.uoregon.edu
Address: 128.223.40.46

Name: sdn-ap-001watacoP1036.dialsprint.net
Address: 63.187.196.20

Name: user-33qtnqe.dialup.mindspring.com
Address: 199.174.223.78

Name: sdn-ap-001watacoP0237.dialsprint.net
Address: 63.187.192.237

Name: sdn-ap-001watacoP0237.dialsprint.net
Address: 128.223.40.72

To summarize, in 24 of 28 messages, "Jeremy Claptrap" sent his email from computers in CIRL, Matt Ginsberg's lab at the University of Oregon. In at least one case, Matt Ginsberg and "Jeremy Claptrap" sent email messages from the same machine within an hour and a half of "each other".

Finally, also on 31 July 2001, I discovered the intact BCC line mentioned above. better-whois.com reports:

Registrant: On Time Systems, Inc. (OTSYS-DOM)-29585 Fox Hollow Road
Eugene, OR 97405
US

Domain Name: OTSYS.COM

Administrative Contact, Billing Contact:
Ginsberg, Matthew (MG7215) ginsberg@CIRL.UOREGON.EDU
Just Write, Inc. 29585 Fox Hollow Road
Eugene, OR 97405
(541) 485-4271

Technical Contact:
Lee, Ron (LR1663-ORG) dnstech@OTSYS.COM
On Time Systems
1850 Millrace Drive, #1
Eugene, OR 97403
USA
541-346-0449
Fax- 541-346-0474

Record last updated on 10-Apr-2001.
Record expires on 30-Apr-2003.
Record created on 30-Apr-1999.
Database last updated on 2-Aug-2001 05:03:00 EDT.

Domain servers in listed order:

START.OTSYS.COM 128.223.40.5
PHLOEM.UOREGON.EDU 128.223.32.35

Here are the name server reports on otsys.com and on otsys.com's IP address:

Name: otsys.com
Address: 128.223.40.58

Name: cirl.uoregon.edu
Address: 128.223.40.58

However, there does not appear to me to be any evidence about Ron Lee that is absolutely conclusive. Certainly, plenty of people are named Ron.

Again, I brought all of this to the attention of Al Levy. As I write this on 3 August 2001, these are all the facts that I know. While I am aware of much speculation and have speculated myself, this is the set of hard data that we know about "Jeremy Claptrap".

- Stephen Joseph Smith
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Fax: +1-301-765-8004

This is the original notice, posted on Al Levy's web site.

The mystery of Jeremy Claptrap and his Hoogli...
from the Al Levy World Computer Bridge Championship site

The Hoogli program was originally entered in the FunBridge.com 2001 4th World Computer Bridge Championships. The owner was Jeremy Claptrap of New Zealand. Jeremy Claptrap appeared, through his e-mail communications, to be an old chap with a Victorian style of writing. At the last minute Claptrap announced that he was having trouble with his passport and was sending his grandson to enter the championship. He described, in some confusing detail, a past that included some underground activities 30 years ago. Consequently, Claptrap claimed, he was being sought by some officials and couldn't reveal his address or phone number. Matt Ginsberg volunteered to help the grandson at these championships, and was to come July 22. Matt Ginsberg did not enter his GIB program into the Championship because of conflicting promotional activities in Toronto that was to take place on July 28-29. The Hoogli program was sent to all the contestants, as well as to Matt Ginsberg.

The case of Jeremy Claptrap took a mysterious turn.. two of the contestants uncovered that Hoogli was really the GIB program. There is evidence that Jeremy Claptrap is an impostor, and most likely a virtual character.

Matt Ginsberg has thanked Al Levy and those programers who helped uncover the fraud. Ginsberg claimed that Jeremy Claptrap stole his source code. Subsequently, Ginsberg reports, he demanded that Claptrap return his source code and promise not to profit from it. Ginsberg announced that Claptrap responded and agreed to his conditions, and that the matter is closed as far as he is concerned.