

On The River

Texas Hold 'Em as an 'Agôn – Alea' Calloisian Hybrid

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Introduction: a cautionary tale about 'winning'

'If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all'

Booker T. Jones and William Bell, *Born Under a Bad Sign*

Winning is a most dangerous thing for the amateur poker player, especially those who, like me, don't really expect to win. Okay, 'win' is an exaggeration in my case; let's say 'place'. After an evening of frantic tournament play at the (now defunct) Gutshot Poker Club in Clerkenwell, London I managed to reach the final table and place eighth, pocketing a small profit over and above the £10 I had spent to play and the few drinks I had consumed during the event. That August night in 2004 I found myself at the bus-stop after the tournament with a pocket full of winnings, calculating my annual income based on a weekly victory, and was even considering the implications of taking those winnings and applying them to the much more dangerous endeavour of the no-limit cash game.

That was my last game of competitive poker; I recognised the folly of that path and decided to stop immediately. I was a passable Texas hold 'em (or holdem) player but nothing more, and realised that the game, though dependent to an extent on probability and luck, was also a game of skill and nerve; I felt I lacked the latter qualities and was not prepared to hope for the former.

This essay seeks to examine the dynamic balance between these traits of luck and skill in holdem, and to analyse the game as a dynamic hybrid of the play formations defined by Callois (1961). The world of holdem is populated by unlucky breaks (or 'bad beats') and post-experiential explanations for failure, with victory often ascribed to skill or nerve on the part of the player; this sets up contrasting modes of play within the game which make it more complex than the simple mechanics would indicate. In Calloisian terms, the 'agôn' aspects of the game (concerned with skill, competition and a clear outcome with winners and losers) are interlaced with those of the 'alea' (concerned with chance and luck). This piece examines these states in the contexts of strategy and contingency, their amelioration and consequences on play, and

seeks to investigate Texas hold 'em as an model of culture.

Texas hold 'em: game and cultural phenomenon

'I guess if there weren't luck involved, I'd win every time.'

Phil Helmuth Jr., card player

The history of poker is well documented elsewhere but, briefly, is thought to be derived from the French game of poque. It developed into poker in the Cajun regions of Louisiana around 1829. There are many varieties of poker including, among others, stud, draw, razz, omaha and, of course, holdem (the development of which is less clear). In recent times Texas hold 'em has risen to prominence largely through the extensive TV coverage of the World Series of Poker and, in the UK, televised tournaments such as 'Late Nigh Poker' which first went to air in 1999. It is arguably the most popular form of poker in the world today as a spectator event and a players game, both online and in casinos and clubs. It seems likely that this is because of the game-play mechanics; it is easy to learn but difficult to master. The game has also proven eminently televisable, especially since the advent of the under-table camera which allows the commentators and audience members to see each players hidden (or 'hole') cards.

Texas hold 'em is a simple game to learn and a basic run down of the rules and order of play follows; this explanation is not exhaustive though and there are many other elements to the game, such as table position, compulsory bets (called small and big blinds) used to start the pot, and discarded or 'burnt' cards – these factors will be described only where appropriate to the analysis. Also, the ranking of winning hands, though vital to the game, are not relevant to the analysis and are therefore included as an appendix.

Play proceeds as follows: any number of players, at least two and, generally, at most ten, are each dealt two face-down hole cards, with three further cards being dealt, also face-down, onto the table. These communal cards are known as 'the flop'. The players then participate in an initial round of betting based upon their hidden cards and, when everyone has completed this stage, the flop is shown. Another round of

betting then takes place, with the five cards (the flop plus each players hole cards) now constituting the hand being contested. It is usual at this stage for some players to fold and drop out, as the flop offers the best chance to construct a strong hand, or to realise that you don't have a hand! The remaining players will then look to 'fourth street' (or 'the turn'), another communal card dealt onto the table, and proceed with another betting round. Assuming there are still two or more players involved, a fifth card, 'the river', is dealt and a final round of betting takes place. When this is complete, the cards are all revealed and the strongest hand wins and that player takes the pot. A split-pot is possible should the remaining players possess equally strong hands, as five of the seven cards in the hand are essentially shared. In tournament play, limited numbers of chips are distributed and when a players chip supply is exhausted they drop out of the game. In no-limit cash games however, play will continue until the supply of money runs out.

Agôn: tells, bets and performance

'Eighteen times in a row. Eighteen sessions with negative results. Sixteen entries in my disintegrating poker ledger. Disaster. '

Jesse May, Shut Up and Deal

The most interesting thing about the agôn mode of play in holdem is the fact that, with a knowledge of the probabilities associated with the card deck and an ability to read other players, it is quite possible to win with the worst hand thus banishing the alea state. The ability to gauge an opponents hand by their bearing and demeanour is a key skill, and of primary import for the beginner is learning how to spot and avoid 'tells' (unconscious physical actions such as tapping, twitching, humming or scratching) which reveal the strength of the cards held. Another important area is that of representation, whereby the tell can be deliberately employed to misrepresent the strength of a hand, creating a state within play described by Malaby (2007) as 'social contingency'; a player is 'never... certain about another's point of view' (p.108).

Under the agôn mode, betting strategy is the main weapon in the poker players arsenal. Phil Helmuth Jr., the famous 'poker brat' and a highly successful player, in his book *Play Poker Like The Pros*, advocates aggressive representation as the primary method leading to victory. When a weak hand is dealt to a player, Helmuth states that an immediate fold is the best option (with some exceptions, such as when in the 'blind' position when a mandatory bet is required before the hand is dealt). This not only avoids a likely loss, but can be used against other players; folding these hands will eventually lead your opponents to believe that they have formulated your strategy. At an opportune moment this can be used against them by placing a large bet to misrepresent the hand as being stronger than it is, leading the other players to fold. Timing is vital for making this type of play work, as early betting is generally lower in value, but removing strong hands before it is too late is important; once a player has committed a certain amount to the pot they will be less keen to drop out. When a strong hand is held, representation is just as important; betting to indicate a weaker hand can lead to a larger pot for the winner, as other players may bet despite holding marginal cards.

Although players can, theoretically, do nothing about the cards dealt to them, it is possible in Texas hold 'em to work around this element of chance to achieve success. Malaby (2003) writes that all games are about overcoming disorder through the management of contingency and, sure enough, in the best holdem players, an in-depth knowledge of the probabilities is weighed against a judgement call about the other participants, based upon foreknowledge and their current patterns of play. They will then proceed to use representation and betting strategy to defeat opponents regardless of the cards that are dealt, largely through considering the long-term outcomes of a series of hands rather than merely looking to win every one. Performative contingency, to use Malaby's classification, when considering agôn play in Texas hold 'em, is the most important factor for the skilled player, closely followed by social contingency related to the behaviour of opponents.

Alea: rituals, runs and bad beats

'It's unlucky to be superstitious'

Dave Enteles, card player

It is possible in Texas hold 'em to lose despite seemingly favourable odds and, as a result, the magical-religious worldview, as described by Reith (1999), can be found to be present to some extent in the behaviours and activities of many players. When the aleal mode of play prevails, as the cards are dealt and the communal cards shown, luck is the primary factor; to again utilise Malaby's taxonomy, that of stochastic contingency. The bad beat is a common tale of woe around poker rooms and casinos, and it is usually ascribed to either a negative magical or religious force, and is often combated by utilising ritual.

Superstitions and personal rituals are extremely common among many players of games and competitive sports-people. Gmelch (1990), writing about Denis Grossini of the Detroit Tigers baseball team, states that 'he went to the nearest restaurant for two glasses of iced tea and a tuna fish sandwich... he changed into the sweat shirt and supporter he wore during his last winning game, and one hour before the game he chewed a wad of Beech-Nut chewing tobacco.' (p.373). This pre-game ritual, though deemed important by Grossini, remained impenetrable to him. Quoting the player, Gmelch writes '[y]ou can't really tell what's most important so it all becomes important. I'd be afraid to change anything.' In this context these pre-game rituals have become ingrained habits despite the lack of obvious connection to any real event in the game. Some others rituals in baseball are performed during game-play, such as a hitter touching a crucifix and then getting a hit, and are described by Gmelch (ibid) as having been learned in a Skinnerian fashion (p.382). These rituals are all ascribed with continuing a good run of results or performances, but the other side of this coin is that of avoiding bad luck and bad beats.

Somé (1997) writes that '[i]t is better not to do a ritual at all than to do one the wrong way.' (p.40) and in some instances, poker players have found their normal rituals have failed them. When a magically

defined object, such as a lucky charm, stops working for them they will often leap from the magical to the religious perspective and blame this on a run of bad luck foisted upon them by the poker gods. Bellin (2002) writes about how he 'once saw an Episcopal minister... swear to devote more time to reading the Torah after having pocket kings crushed two hands in a row.' (p.43). This cosmic force can be neutralised, the player believes, by performing another ritualistic action, in a way similar to the healing rituals designed to counter some illness inflicted by the cosmos as described by Mauss (1972 [1950]: p.76). This can also be seen clearly in many other sports and games, such as the case in baseball, described by Gmelch (ibid), of John Odom from Oakland. When suffering a slump in his pitching form, Odom requested a change in uniform number, from his formerly lucky 13; it didn't help (p.379)

Conclusion: ludus-agôn-alea

'You can shear a sheep many times, but you can only skin it once'

Thomas Austin 'Amarillo Slim' Preston, card player

In Texas hold 'em, the manner of play is accepted as being a large factor in victory or defeat; it can therefore be classified, using Callois' (1961) system as containing an 'agôn' mode which requires skill and training. The element of chance lies in the fall of the cards however, and, sure enough, when a player hits a losing streak, this is usually what gets blamed; the player gets a 'bad beat'. Conversely, when a victorious player gets 'the nuts' (the best hand in concert with the flop that best matches that hand) they also often ascribe this to luck. This means the game can also be said to employ Callois' 'alea' mode of play, along with associated phenomena, such as a tendency toward the magical-religious worldview which is often exhibited by holdem players. Even seasoned veterans show symptoms of superstition and fall back on ritual as a remedy to bad luck and bad beats. Arguments for poker being declared a sport and included in the Olympic Games (which occurred several years ago) raise interesting parallels with other sports, such as baseball or golf, where under-performing is often combated through the use of prayer or magic.

Statistically it is true that players of Texas hold 'em do seem to have good and bad runs and these are often attributed to luck (or a lack of it), but perhaps more attention should be focussed on judgement, mind management and personal performance. Luck in poker, unlike most other forms of gambling, actually has very little to do with it in the long term as attested to by the life-long records of success that can be seen in the cases of the truly great players. This would imply that holdem, though a dynamic and variable hybrid of agôn and alea, is ultimately a game of skill.

From the perspective of Callois' theories holdem, as a game, can be classified as 'ludus: agôn – alea' – it is a rule based game with elements of luck and chance. Callois himself wrote about this type of hybrid when comparing modes of play with contemporary 1950s culture: '[a]gôn and alea imply opposite and somewhat complementary attitudes, but they both obey the same law – the creation for the players of conditions of pure equality denied them in real life. For nothing in life is clear, since everything is confused from the very beginning, luck and merit too. Play, whether agôn or alea, is thus an attempt to substitute perfect situations for the normal confusion of contemporary life. ' (1961: p.19)

Time has rendered some of Callois ideas obsolete, particularly his notions of 'civilisation' and 'progress' drawn from his studies of the classical roots of play, but his thoughts about the agôn – alea hybrid fit well with holdem: 'In societies based upon the combination of merit and chance, there is also an incessant effort, not always successful or rapid, to augment the role of justice to the detriment of that of chance. This effort is called progress' (1961: p.78)

Perhaps Texas hold 'em is the phenomenon that is today, particularly in the US, the UK and Europe, precisely because it is such a good model for an idealised form of capitalist meritocracy. The alea, the element of chance, although offering a glimmer of hope to the beginner or the inexperienced (in a manner similar to the National Lottery or Euro Millions for example), is outweighed by the agôn aspects. It is usually the case, in the long run, that the most talented players end up ahead and the ones who rely on luck do not; it thus contains the elements that are considered desirable in modern culture where it is deemed only proper that, while stringently following the rules laid down by society, the cream rises to the

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top through talent and skill. Although this is not always the case, in life or in poker, it is nevertheless these traits that provide the framework for hope and aspiration in the cultures that play Texas hold 'em.

Notes

Quotes that appear at the beginnings of sections, if they are not from cited works, are taken from the Poker

Quotes website at: <http://www.theholdemlounge.com/articles/quotes.html>

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Appendix

Ranks of poker hands (lowest to highest)

N.B. Aces are always high in Texas hold 'em.

- 1) High card (no pair) – highest single card wins
- 2) Pair – highest pair wins (e.g. a pair of aces)
- 3) Two pair – two different pairs in a hand, highest wins (e.g. a pair of aces and a pair of kings)
- 4) Three of a kind – highest 'trips', or triple, wins (e.g. three aces)
- 5) Straight – consecutive numerical run, highest wins (e.g. 8/9/10/J/Q - mix of suites)
- 6) Flush – all cards the same suite
- 7) Full house – all cards utilised (e.g. trips aces and a pair of kings)
- 8) Four of a kind – four cards of the same type (e.g. four aces)
- 9) Straight flush – consecutive numerical runs, all the same suite (e.g. 8/9/10/J/Q of hearts)
- 10) Royal straight flush – as a straight flush, only ace high (e.g. 10/J/Q/K/A of hearts)