



FREEROLL

POKER STRATEGY YOU CAN USE

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ISSUE 4

Demystifying Tilt

When I started working in poker I had a master's degree in counselling psychology and thousands of hours of experience in my field but I had never heard of tilt. Six years later and tilt is the biggest part of my job as a mental game coach and the focal point of my book *The Mental Game of Poker*. Despite the fact that tilt is possibly the most destructive part of anyone's earn rate, very little has been done to understand it until now.

As an outsider looking in from the psychology industry, perhaps my biggest observation about tilt was that it has been built up to be a much bigger, more mysterious entity than it actually needs to be. There is no wonder that it can be so frustrating because it is viewed as something random that it can't be fixed.

Tilt is actually much more straightforward than you may think, but you need to understand it better before you can tackle it. In this article I'll straighten out a few of the major misconceptions about tilt.

Tilt Is Random

One of the biggest reasons why tilt is seen as mysterious is because poker players have been led to believe that it occurs randomly, it is the same conventional wisdom that also suggests that playing your A game is equally as random. Nothing could be further from the truth. Tilt is actually incredibly predictable. The problem is that most people do not have an idea of what warning signs they need to look out for.

The first thing I do with all my clients is to get them to work on their Tilt Profile. This is a questionnaire designed to help them understand what

causes their tilt (triggers), what happens when they're on tilt or in the escalation of it (what they say, do, think, and how they play), and how they can spot tilt before it gets so bad that it affects how they play. Often just being aware of what they find in the Tilt Profile is enough to reduce tilt. For that reason, I recommend they keep working to understand and recognize their tilt; it allows them to anticipate when they're about to tilt so that they can nip it in the bud. Plus, it also makes it easier to track progress. For example, when you see that a particular trigger – a bad beat – happen and it doesn't cause you to start playing more aggressively, you can prove that you're making progress rather than just thinking you are.

Tilt = Bad Play

Another reason why tilt is an impossible problem to fix is because it is defined too broadly. For many players it simply means playing less than their best. So, instead of isolating key details about why you played badly, you just focus on what happened. Whether it was a small technical mistake (losing focus, losing to a fish, autopiloting, feeling pressure) or a monkey tilt rage that costs you six buy-ins, everything is described as 'tilt.' When your definition of tilt is so vague, there's no way to implement a specific solution to fix it.

There are many things that tilt is and many things it is not, so in order to make tilt easier to understand, this is a simple formula I have created to describe tilt: $Tilt = Anger + Bad Play$

In the thousands of hours I've spent working with poker players from around the world, when

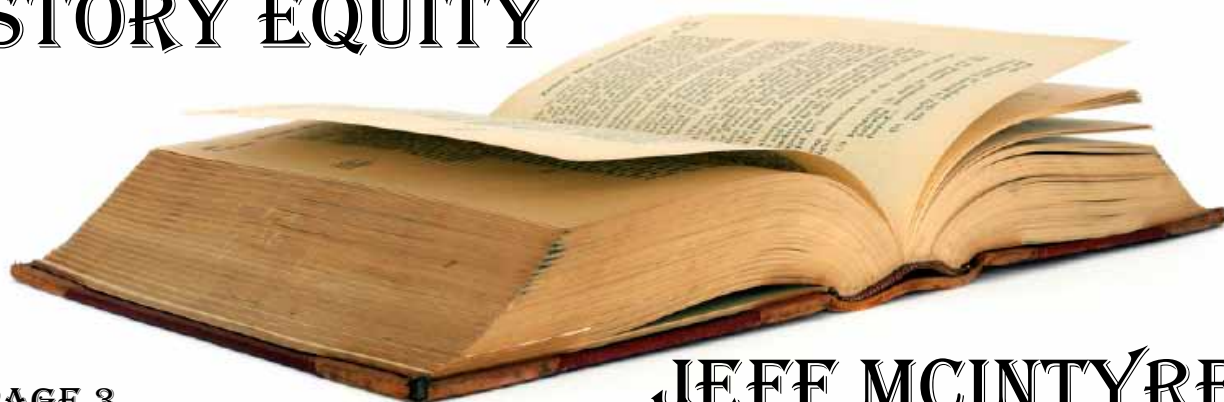
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STORY EQUITY



JEFF MCINTYRE

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Mirror their face



to guess their
emotion

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New Book Preview: Red Chip Poker: Late Position

Chapter: If a flush seems unlikely, bet your straight for value.

Often a third flush card will slow down the action. Even when you have a straight, it can feel too dangerous to bet. A fourth straight card will often slow down the action even more. If you hand read well, you can still push the action when these action-killing cards come. You might get paid off by a hand that is strong in an absolute sense, yet is very weak on the given board.

*(Read charts from top to bottom.
e.g. Hero bets \$25 then calls Big Blind's raise)*

\$2-\$5 Mohegan Sun	Image:	Action:	Hand:	Starting Stack:
Hijack	Hero	\$25/Call	J ⁺ 10 ⁺	Covers
Cutoff	TAG	Call/Fold	♠ ♠	\$600
Big Blind	Bad Player	\$55	? ?	\$755

<Question symbol means bad bet size>

We do not like being squeezed here, but the player in the Big Blind is not savvy enough to be doing this as a bluff. Our read is he has a hand, but he has poor bet sizing. We have seen him size bets poorly in the past and make many post-flop calling mistakes. A bet of this size will rarely fold out the competition; it just bloats the pot. A raise to \$100 would have made our call incorrect, given the stack sizes. Bad players are notorious for sizing their three-bets poorly, and so we cannot fully exclude hands like AA and KK.

Bad player's small three-bet from the Big Blind													
AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s	
AK	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s	
AQ	KQ	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s	
AJ	KJ	QJ	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s	
AT	KT	QT	JT	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s	
A9	K9	Q9	J9	T9	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s	
A8	K8	Q8	J8	T8	98	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s	
A7	K7	Q7	J7	T7	97	87	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s	
A6	K6	Q6	J6	T6	96	86	76	66	65s	64s	63s	62s	
A5	K5	Q5	J5	T5	95	85	75	65	55	54s	53s	52s	
A4	K4	Q4	J4	T4	94	84	74	64	54	44	43s	42s	
A3	K3	Q3	J3	T3	93	83	73	63	53	43	33	32s	
A2	K2	Q2	J2	T2	92	82	72	62	52	42	32	22	

The flop comes out.

J ⁺ 9 ⁺ 8 ⁺	Pot: \$137	Range:	Starting Stack:
Bad Player (Big Blind)	Check/Call	? ?	\$700
Hero (Hijack)	\$80	J ⁺ 10 ⁺	Covers

<Capped arrow symbols means limits his hand value to lower values>

This is a good flop for us: top pair with an open-ended straight draw. When checked to, we should be even happier. One thing to consider is the range he would check on the flop. Some players would default continuation bet with their top pairs, or overpairs. Others get nervous on this texture and check-call more often. In this instance, we cannot be sure what his check-call means. We decide to bet the flop for \$80. This bet will likely fold out his equity with

AK, but will never fold out a better hand like AJ or QQ. However, when he calls the \$80, we will often see both the turn and river for that price. We have to acknowledge that we are behind most of the time when he calls our \$80, but we have position, initiative, and lots of equity. This cannot be stressed enough; this is closer to a semi-bluff than a value bet.

J ⁺ 9 ⁺ 8 ⁺ Q ⁺	Pot: \$297	Range:	Starting Stack:
Bad Player (Big Blind)	Check/Call	? ?	\$620
Hero (Hijack)	\$200	J ⁺ 10 ⁺	Covers

<Thin dollar sign symbols means thin value bet>

Unfortunately, the flush came in. If the Villain had KT, it would give him a better straight. Should we take the free river card? No.

Let us consider the two biggest fears here: a flush and a higher straight with KT. Hand reading is a multi-street process. You should not put hands back into the Villain's range out of fear.

Flush draw: The Queen of Hearts on the turn makes him holding AhQh impossible. Given his three-bet range pre-flop, he can only make a flush here with exactly AhKh. How would he have played this on the flop? Most players would either continuation bet with AhKh on the flop or go for a check-raise. His check-call reduces the likelihood of him having a flush.

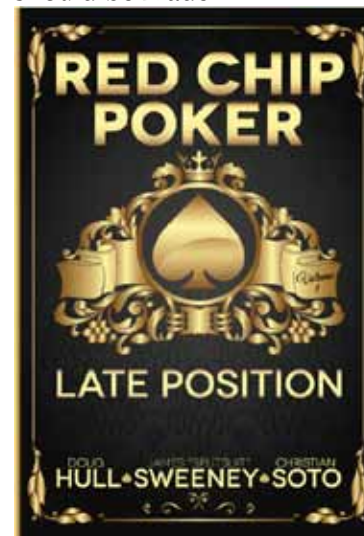
Better Straight: What about KT? We do not see him three-betting into two people with that pre-flop.

Why bet? What is he going to pay us off with? Top pair, top kicker is reasonable if he calls the flop with a gutshot and overcards. Maybe he has turned a set with QQ or has a slowplayed JJ. He could also have AA or KK with a Heart that he decided to play cautiously on the flop. His second call is good for us. It fits with all our reads thus far.

J ⁺ 9 ⁺ 8 ⁺ Q ⁺ A ⁺	Pot: \$697	Range:	Starting Stack:
Bad Player (Big Blind)	Check/Fold	♠ ♠	\$420
Hero (Hijack)	Shove	J ⁺ 10 ⁺	Covers

This very well could be our money card. We have seen this Villain pay off with bluff catchers that were unlikely to even beat many bluffs. If he has top two pair or a set, he could pay us off. It is unclear what he folded, but we got value for our second nut straight on a flushed board. Weaker players miss the bet on the turn and do not even try for the river value.

It is fun to say, "I should have bet the river. I knew you had two pair." But, it is far more profitable to do something about it. As you become more confident with your hand reading, the next step is to take action. If you are good 51% of the time when called on your river bet, it is a profitable bet that should be made.



REDCHIPPOKER.COM

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Beware Story Equity

Poker being a game of incomplete information, equity assessment is a central aspect. Pot equity is assessed to measure the value of our holding, fold equity is measured by estimating how probable it is that our opponent(s) will fold, and showdown value appears when we have decent pot equity with a marginal hand.

Properly assessing these equities is essential in making winning poker decisions. A poker hand calls for us to make numerous assumptions about our opponents' hand ranges, our perceived ranges and about how everyone will act/react during play. This makes assessing pot equity one of the toughest skills a winning poker player must master.

But the goal of this article is not to tackle difficult equity estimation problems. My goal with this article is to convince you to follow the simplest of poker advice; I plead with you to stop adding value to your hands due to story equity!

What is Story Equity?

I coined the term Story Equity to describe the act of giving value to marginal hands due to the fact that we might have a good story to tell after losing a big pot with it.

Not only does story equity have negative chip/cash value, the "story" part is also vastly overrated. **Your story is not nearly as compelling as you may think.** Your poker buddies, tablemates, co-workers and relatives will be extremely underwhelmed.

Forms of Story Equity

In order to help you recognize the spots where you might commonly assign Story Equity to your hand, here are the 3 most common forms.

Crying Calls

When a tilting player gets robbed by the deck, he wants the table to witness the visual evidence. Coolers and bad beats are easily the most common poker stories overheard in home games and card rooms. People can't wait to share these stories with the world, and they need to get felted to make the story complete.

Sick Bluffs

Famous TV players like Phil Ivey, Tom Dwan and Gus Hansen have made huge bluffs look like the Holy Grail of poker strategy. Fact is, these players don't bluff blindly; they pick optimal spots to do so. Bluffing someone out of huge pot and showing the table afterwards might sound like a winning play, but doing so primarily for the sake of having a story to tell is a losing proposition.

Pet Hands

This form of story equity is less common than the others, but it can be just as costly. Players fall in love with specific raggedy hole cards, and feel the need to overplay them.

Doyle Brunson famously loves to play 10-2 since clinching two WSOP bracelets with the hand. A few years ago, I saw Doyle confess on TV (I think it was during an episode of Poker After Dark) that he has lost tons of money with his favorite hand.

He feels like he has to play it to continue the story, and he pays dearly for it.

Personally, I have a weakness for 10-6. This started about 5 years ago when I was playing a session of heads up freeze-outs with a good friend of mine. Our table was two cardboard moving boxes and we were sitting on beer coolers playing in the empty house I was moving into the next morning. It was a weird session, and my anxious mood (I dread moving) had me begging for a light moment. When I played a very loose 10-6 in a huge pot and bluffed him on the river, I showed the bluff and hilarity ensued. My buddy overreacted and I rubbed it in emphatically. I now refer to 10-6 as being the nuts to anyone willing to listen. But the hand is a big loser for me and will continue to be so unless I let this story die.

Poker is a complex, psychological game that tends to present conflicting goals. Winning chips/dollars/tournaments should be the ultimate goal for any competitive player, but the journey often blinds us from the destination. The need to demonstrate our prowess or the frustration this beautiful game inflicts upon us can be overbearing. Fight these urges, and save the story telling for your losing opponents.



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Mucking philosophy

If you've ever played Heads-up, think about how tilting it is when your opponent is running hot. You raise, he three-bets, you four-bet bluff, he shoves.

You fold.

You bet the flop, two-barrel the turn, and then he bets the river. You fold. You thinly value bet the turn and he raises. You fold. Let's be honest here, you're still playing great. But you're kinda pissed off. More so than if he had checked that river and won, more so than if he had just called that turn instead of raised. In short, not seeing your opponents cards does two things: it keeps us from knowing how they play (this is common knowledge), but it also keeps us from satisfying one of our most instinctual, natural psychological necessities — knowing the intangible answer or conclusion to the hand. Let me put it this way: every good joke has a punchline. If we hear a joke and then not the punchline, it frustrates us. Every good story has an ending. If you get left on a cliffhanger without a resolution, you get frustrated

(and thusly tricked into watching LOST again the next week, but that show is so good that its okay). The same thing happens over the course of a poker hand.

The simple idea is this— not allowing your opponent to see your cards does more than simply deprive them of valuable information they could use against you. It is tilting. There is a psychological edge in making your opponent muck that will manifest itself later in the match.

This means that when you have close choices (Do I bet for thin-value or check? Do I make this bold, thin-bluff raise or not? 4-bet bluff or flat call?) you should be inclined to take the more aggressive option. Even if its slightly wrong, it won't be too wrong, and it does wonders for game flow.

Now I'll try to think of a few examples that might elucidate:

In a Heads-up match, you raise Q8 OTB and get a call from the blinds. The flop is Q43 with a flush draw. He checks, you bet, and he check raises. You don't really think he's good enough to check raise a

top pair hand here (maybe AQ, but he'd probably 3-bet). So his range is either monster stuff (sets or slowplayed big stuff), or, more likely, draws or air. You call. The turn is a 9, and he fires again. Let's say that you know he probably only fires the turn with some kind of equity, and you think he probably check folds the river some percentage of the time when he misses. It's a close call— raise or fold? This is a spot where I would raise. Call it capitalization of dead money, value, both, or whatever. Either way, if he had the nut flush draw, or 56 for a straight draw, it is tilting to muck there. That's the basic idea.



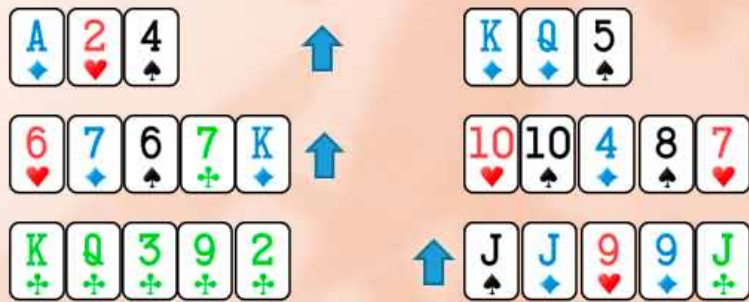
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Open Face Chinese Poker

Win points by making three poker hands:



- 2, 3 or 4 players.
- Players alternate turns and the deal.
- Points can have any value you choose.
- Each of three hands is worth a point.
- Top hand may not beat middle.
- Middle may not beat bottom.
- Fouled setups lose all three hands.
- Winning all three hands is worth six points total.
- Royalties paid for high hands- see list to right.
- Hands are set first five cards at once, then one at a time.
- Pair of Queens or better on top, next hand is Fantasyland.
- Fantasyland: Set all cards all at once after everyone else.

STRAIGHT	4
FLUSH	4
BOAT	6
QUADS	10
STRAIGHT FLUSH ...	15
ROYAL FLUSH	25
66-AA UP TOP	1-9
TRIPS UP TOP	20
ROYALTIES IN MIDDLE ARE DOUBLED	

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Why Get Poker Coaching?

This is the question I asked myself several years ago when I was thinking of getting coached by Ed Miller. Am I really going to give this guy \$500 to sit in a Starbucks and talk about poker? My initial answer was, "No!"

Then my buddy says to me, "Doug, I have seen you make some seriously questionable calls for \$500 where you did not learn a damned thing?" He was right; I gave it a shot. My book Poker Plays You Can Use documents the changes I made in my game after coaching with Ed and how I made them. I should have paid Ed \$1000.

Good coaches can see where your mistakes are, where your missed opportunities are, and why you are stalling out at your current thinking. We can see that because we have been there ourselves.

Your coaching bio here, hull@ThreeBarrelBluff.com for pricing.

Open Face Chinese Poker Strategy: Go for Fantasyland?

How would you set



Although this seems like a simple question, it produces two extreme support groups.

One group is confident that playing aggressive and setting for Fantasy Land is the right play. They would set it



The other group opts for the conservative route and wants to set it



So who's right?

I was curious so I used Warren's OFC Simulator and ran some simulations for only spade cards against a random board of



Here was the result.

DRAW	Qc / KhKd / 7c8c	/ KhKd / Qc7c8c
2s	-0.61	0.04
3s	-0.51	0.01
4s	-0.29	0.07
5s	0.01	-0.07
6s	0.87	0.08
7s	1.64	-0.11
8s	2.01	0.31
9s	2.13	0.55
10s	0.44	0.89
Jc	-0.37	0.75
Qc	4.85	2.79
Ks	-0.46	0.77
As	-0.04	0.86
Total Equity for spades	9.67	6.94

As you can see, playing aggressive and going for Fantasy Land produces superior results. Drawing a Queen and getting to Fantasy Land makes up for the loss of equity when fouling.

Then I got more curious.

How would a club on the first draw change Hero's equity?

DRAW	Qc / KhKd / 7c8c	/ KhKd / Qc7c8c
2c	2.89	4.6
3c	3.17	4.99
4c	3.47	4.34
5c	4.47	4.63
6c	3.94	4.67
7c		
8c		
9c	6.14	5.53
10c	4.48	5.57
Jc	2.66	4.7
Qc		
Kc	3.6	4.59
Ac	4.64	5.35
Total Equity for clubs	39.46	48.97

Wow. Drawing a club on the first draw gave Hero almost a 10 points advantage. Now I really want to know what the answer is so I ran simulations for all the cards on the first draw.

As it turns out, the results are super close. 66.47 points if you try for Fantasyland versus 67.4 points if you do not.

In my simulations, setting it the second way with the Queen at the bottom is slightly better. However, this could be due to variance in the simulation and there are days when setting it more aggressively works.

In the final analysis, if you want to play a high variance game or are feeling lucky, set for high variance and go for Fantasyland. If you want to lower variance, set it to just get the flush on the bottom. Right now the analysis says it is close enough that nearly the same outcome.

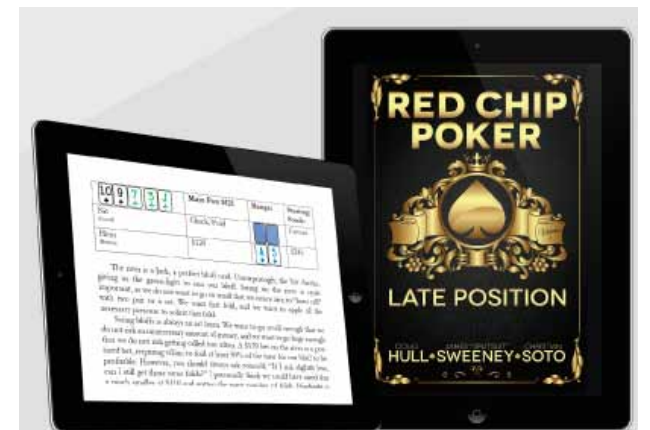


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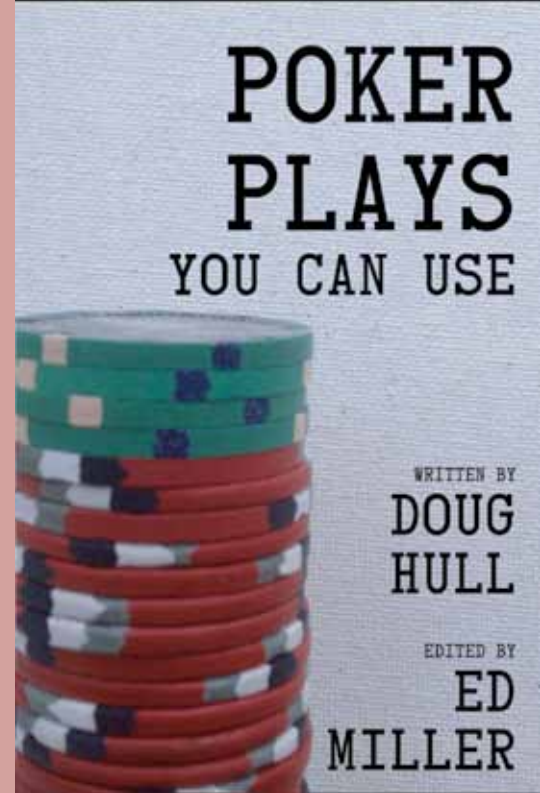
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“First and foremost this book is easy to read. Most poker books are not.”

“I have plugged some leaks in my game and my win rate is starting to go up. It's also made poker more fun for me.”

“I anxiously started reading the various plays to see how to better exploit the donks on the strip, but about a third of the way into the book I was recognizing dumb plays that *I* make. This book might make me more money by plugging my leaks rather than adding bullets to my gun!”

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Poker Is A Skill: How To Stop Losing, Part 3

Put Your Opponent on a Range

When I was just getting started in poker, I was always asking myself, “Does he have it?” If I had some hand that was strong enough to beat a bluff but not a good hand, I would try to decide whether my opponent had a strong hand or was bluffing this time.

It was a binary scenario. He either had “it,” or didn’t have “it.” Sometimes this “it” would be a particular hand, like the nuts. Other times it might be a type of hand, like a flush. The point is that I would try to figure out whether my opponent was or wasn’t bluffing in this particular hand.

It took me the better part of a decade to learn that I had it all wrong. I should never have been trying to put my opponent on a specific hand. However, that is what most beginning players do, and even a good number of decent players.

A much better way to approach the game is to put your opponent on a range of hands. Consider all of the actions the player has taken to this point in the hand, and come up with all of the hands this player might play this way. This collection of hands, along with their associated frequencies, is referred to as a distribution, or a range.

How do I put an opponent on a range?

The simplest way is to start at the beginning of a hand and consider your opponent’s first action. Which hands would they raise or call with? In Hold ‘em, you begin with the preflop action. With each subsequent action, you must further refine that range, subtracting hands that your opponent would not play this way. On occasion, an action late in a hand will force you to reconsider earlier actions to see if you’ve misjudged your opponent’s earlier range.

I think I get it, but can you give me an example?

Let’s say your opponent is a tight and aggressive player sitting three seats off the button. He’s the first to enter the pot and makes a normal-sized raise. What is his range of hands?

You will rarely have a precise answer to this question. What you can do is make an educated guess. We’ve established that this player is tight and aggressive. So he’ll be raising most or all of the hands he plays, but he’ll also be folding all of the bad hands he’s dealt. Let’s say he raises all pocket pairs, all suited Broadway hands (any two cards ten or higher), ace-king and ace-queen offsuit. This is

about 10.7% of all the hands he could have been dealt. So we’ve narrowed his range down from any two cards to about 11% of the possible hands.

You call on the button, and everyone else folds. For the purposes of this example, I’m not going to tell you what your cards are. I want you to focus on your opponent’s range. The flop comes out 7h4d2c. That’s a nothing flop. Your opponent bets about two-thirds of the pot. What’s his range?

If this opponent were a very meek player, we could say that his range consists mostly of sets and overpairs. He would likely check his whiffed overcards and underpairs. But this is not a meek player. He’s an aggressive one. So it’s very likely that he’ll bet his entire preflop range on this flop. In other words, he’s still got that range of pocket pairs, suited broadways, and big aces. The unpaired preflop hands are all overcards now. The paired hands can be divided into sets (sevens, fours, and twos), overpairs (nines and higher), and underpairs (sixes, fives, and threes).

You call the flop bet and the turn is the Ts. Your opponent checks. What is his range?

If your opponent is straightforward and aggressive, then you can remove sets and big pairs from his range. He surely would have bet those hands for value. If he likes to bluff a ton, then you might remove some of the overcards from his range. A player like that would often bet his strongest and weakest hands while checking hands of middle strength. So that guy would probably have an underpair in this situation. You might say his range is pocket threes, fives, sixes, eights, and nines. You could also say that he has some hands like ace-king, ace-queen, maybe even jack-ten still in his range when he checks. A less bluff-happy player would still have more hands like king-queen, king-jack, and queen-jack in his range. Let’s say our villain in this hand is of the latter sort.

You check the turn, and the river is the Ad. Your opponent now makes a large bet. This is the sort of situation where you would say that your opponent’s range is polarized. This large river bet after the turn check indicates either a very strong hand (like a set, ace-ten for top two pair, or maybe ace-king for top-pair/top-kicker) or a bluff (king-queen, king-jack, queen-jack). It’s also possible that your opponent has a small pair that he’s turning into a bluff.

So that’s his range. But does he have it?

If you’re playing in a live game, it’s possible that your opponent is exhibiting some tells that allow you to weight his range towards the strong hands or bluffs. But be careful with that. Don’t allow a tell to override all of the other evidence unless you’re extremely confident in your ability to read people.

The question you should be asking is not “Does he have it?” but rather “How often does he have it?” If you have a bluff catcher in this spot and we assume the range of ace-ten, ace-king, and air (KQ/KJ/QJ), then we simply need to figure out how often he has a strong hand compared to how often he has air. There are only two ways to make ace-ten suited here (hearts and clubs), and there are twelve ways to make ace-king (there are three aces remaining and four kings: $3 \times 4 = 12$; we’ll get deeper into these combinatorics in future installments). There are also four suits each for king-queen, king-jack, and queen-jack. So that’s twelve potential bluffing combinations.

So does this player’s range consist of fourteen value combos and twelve bluff combos?

Not necessarily. If we decide this player would always play these particular hands in this particular fashion without fail, then yes. That would make it easy to call a big bet on the river. We would win the pot often enough to make a call very profitable. (More on pot odds in Part 4.)

But sometimes we want to weight the combos unequally. Perhaps we think this guy will bluff only half the time with his whiffed broadways. After all, we decided he would never bluff with them on the turn. Now we’re looking at 14 value combos and 6 bluff combos. If that’s the case, we cannot call a pot-sized bet. We don’t have the odds. Let’s not get too deep into that question, though. For now, let’s focus on the moral of this story: Every time your opponent takes an action, put him on a range of hands.



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Bluffing, Anxiety, and Stillness

When animals are in danger, many have an instinct to “freeze”. It’s a physiological response to fear: the deer-in-the-headlights reaction that we’re all familiar with. And this is how many people react at the poker table when they’re anxious.

Someone being still or not being still is only valuable information if you have observed a person over time and found a correlation for each behavior. Some players are still and stoic all the time when in a hand, regardless of hand strength; the better, more-serious players are often this way. The value in this pattern is in studying people first and seeing if they exhibit the pattern.

For instance, you may notice that when a player makes a value-bet on the river, he has a lot of small movements in his body, his arms, or his hands. He may tap his fingers, he may look around the room, he may make quick glances at his opponent. These are all clues to his level of relaxation.

Then you observe this player when he is bluffing and he is very still compared to several previous situations. Maybe his arms and hands are completely still; maybe he’s not breathing; maybe he’s looking at one place on the table; maybe he’s not blinking. All of these might be small clues that

something is different.

This information is not 100%. Many players are capable of moving around a lot with a good hand and then being completely still the next time they have a good hand. Sometimes, more experienced players will even fake nervous stillness with a strong hand, knowing that other experienced players might be looking for it.

But noticing out-of-the-usual stillness can be one factor when attempting to put together the puzzle pieces and answer the question: “Is this guy bluffing?”

Inducing this tell

The stillness tell can sometimes be induced when you’re contemplating a call. Your opponent may be engaged in some motion or gesture, but when you reach for your chips, the player’s actions suddenly slow or stop. For example, your opponent may stop shuffling his chips, stop bouncing his leg, or pause his breathing for a couple of seconds. Or, he may be talking to his neighbor, trying to seem relaxed, but when you reach for chips, his face will get still and he’ll stop talking.

Basically, you want to try to be in tune with your opponent’s physicality. You want to try to feel

how your opponent reacts to your actions. You want to sniff out the tension that the person wants to hide.

Noticing this behavior

The next time you play, watch players after they make significant bets. (This is even easier if you are not in the hand.) Are they still? Are they moving? What parts of their body are still? What parts are moving? When you get to see their hand, remember these things about them.

If trying to watch multiple players is too difficult, try just watching one or two players. I recommend picking the loosest players at the table; they will be involved in the most pots and you will have the most opportunity to study them.



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Mirror their Face

Some people are better than others at recognizing emotion in others’ faces. That said, a single individual can go through periods when they are better and worse at recognizing emotion. What types of things cause people to become temporarily better or worse at “reading” emotional faces?

It turns out that it isn’t easy to quickly and accurately perceive others’ facial expressions: It takes cognitive (thinking) resources. When people’s mental resources are divided, by being given other cognitive tasks to perform while simultaneously reading faces, they become significantly worse at perceiving emotional facial expressions. This isn’t particularly surprising, and the many mental operations required by poker may be one of the reasons why we often have trouble reading faces around the poker felt.

One thing that can help people read facial expression is known as “facial mimicry” – imitating the expressions we see in others. Facial mimicry is often automatic. For example, when seeing another person in pain, we often produce subtle pain expressions ourselves (this is known as “micro-mimicry”). It turns out that micromimicry actually facilitates people’s ability to perceive others’ emotional expressions. Here is yet another reason why poker players may have trouble reading facial expressions: We typically don’t allow ourselves to express emotion while playing poker (especially when we’re in a hand)!

A recent psychological study examined exactly how cognitive demands and facial mimicry affect people’s abilities to perceive emotional faces (Schneider, Hemel, & Lunch, 2013). In this re-

search, all participants were asked to watch a series of facial expressions that gradually morphed from a neutral facial expression to one of six different emotional expressions (happiness, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, and disgust). Their job was to accurately report as quickly and accurately as possible which emotion was being displayed by the face. The experimental manipulation was this – while performing the task, one-third of the participants were instructed to suppress their own facial expressions (i.e., maintain a “poker face”), one-third were instructed to mimic the facial expressions of the target face as closely as possible, and one-third were to perform the task “naturally” (no special instructions were given).

This is an interesting study because it pitted 2 different variables – cognitive demand and facial mimicry – against each other. Because facial suppression requires both cognitive resources and impedes one’s ability to mimic others’ facial expressions, it should clearly impair facial reading ability. Facial mimicry, however, requires cognitive resources (possibly hurting emotion perception) but obviously facilitates mimicry (possibly aiding the ability to read facial expressions).

What were the results? As expected, compared to the “natural” group, facial suppression dramatically impaired people’s ability to quickly and accurately read emotional faces. Facial mimicry, conversely, actually improved people’s abilities to perceive others’ emotions! (This effect was not quite statistically significant, but very close.)

What does this mean around the poker table? Well, even the greenest of poker players have been taught to pay attention to the action around a table

– even when not playing. The rationale for this is simple: You want to learn players’ tendencies, etc. in order to exploit these tendencies later on. The above research supports the importance of paying attention to the game when not in an active hand, but for very different reasons. For one, we don’t have so many competing cognitive demands when we’re not in a hand. Second, we’re allowed to more flexibly express emotion when outside of a hand. Both of these should enhance our ability to perceive others’ emotions (such as their joy and fear). As such, we may better pick up on players’ tendencies when we’re watching a hand relative to when we’re in a hand! For example, is Player X usually afraid when firing a second barrel (i.e., he’s often bluffing), or is Player Y always strong when floating? Such emotional “reads” have obvious value around the poker table, allowing you to better exploit your opponents’ foibles.



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Reference:

Schneider, K. G., Hempel, R. J., & Lynch, T. R. (2013). That ‘poker face’ just might lose you the game! The impact of expressive suppression and mimicry on sensitivity to facial expressions of emotion. *Emotion*, 13(5), 852-866

(continued from page 1)

players talk about tilt, the large majority are referring to being angry. So while there are a ton of reasons you can play badly, most of the time players talk about being tilted they're referring to playing badly because they are angry. Defining tilt this way makes it simpler to understand. If you are angry but playing well, you are not on tilt. If you are not angry but playing badly, it is not tilt it's something else such as fear, low confidence, being indecisive, or lack of focus. Only if something has made you frustrated, angry, or enraged and you're playing poorly do you have a tilt issue. Not only does this make this issue more straightforward, now you can break down the two elements that make up tilt to hatch a plan to fix it. You can work towards resolving what caused you to get angry and tighten up the leaks that happen when you're angry.

Tilt Is an Unavoidable Part of the Game

No wonder players just accept tilt when it happens; there is a belief that tilt is just an inevitable part of the game, like variance. Perhaps because there are such clear correlations between negative variance and tilt, people just accept that the two things are one in the same. That would be hard to dispute were it not for the reality that not ev-


erybody tilts. If tilt were unavoidable, then everyone who has aces cracked would have the same response, but they don't. Some people can go on tilt after one bad beat, whereas others need several months of coolers to react in the same way.

There has to be something about the way one player approaches the mental game that makes it easier for them to control their tilt than someone with a major tilt issue. The mental game is a skill set like any other in poker, but, compared to the technical work they have put in, most players hardly work at it. My clients have worked really hard to bring their mental game up to speed, and by focusing on this part of poker when most others don't, it's become a great way for them to create an edge.

The Way to Fix Tilt Is to Block it out or Avoid It

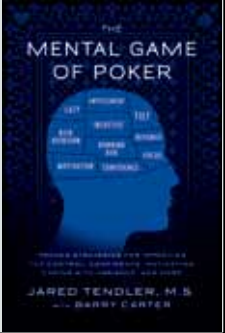
The biggest difference between my work and the conventional wisdom that's out there is how we attempt to combat tilt. Most approaches to poker psychology either advocate ways of numbing yourself to emotions by meditating, breathing exercises, exercise, neurolinguistic programming, holding your breath, or 'just not tilting.' They'll also suggest taking breaks, quitting early, or dropping down stakes as a way of taking the pressure off.

These approaches are good for managing tilt and they do have benefits, but if you're like many players who have tried them, you've found that they only work for a short time. The key is replacing these short-term strategies with a long-term one that resolves the underlying reasons why you tilt. A containment strategy is like a band aid, but the crux of your tilt issue is more like a bullet wound that needs intense work to patch up. You have to get to the reasons why you tilt in order to know how to resolve a tilt issue, and that starts by understanding your tilt better. My book, *The Mental Game of Poker*, goes into great depth about how to understand and solve tilt.



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