

Seniors Scene

Poker IS Science; Algorithm is Proof

By George “The Engineer” Epstein

In my previous column, I told you about Mark Twain’s fascinating essay in which he described how, way back in 1870, a Kentucky court decided that poker really is a game of science – not a game of chance or luck. Then it occurred to me that my Hold’em Algorithm is strong proof of the wisdom of that court’s decision:

Poker is a game of science.

First, we need to understand the meaning of “science.” What exactly is “science”? According to the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, science is “knowledge gained by systematic study;” it is “skill; proficiency.” Unlike “luck” – a combination of circumstances or events that operate by “chance” which is a random occurrence over which you have little or no control, science is skill acquired by careful study and, concomitantly, gaining of knowledge, especially in a systematic way.

What is an algorithm?

Commonly used in scientific and engineering endeavors, an algorithm is a procedure or process for solving a particular problem; it helps you make a difficult decision. Often it can be shown as a formula of one type or another.

My Hold’em Algorithm is in fact a marvelous demonstration of systematic study leading to knowledge and skill; and it helps the “scientist” (poker player) to make a key decision while playing Texas Hold’em:

With these two hole cards, should I stay in or should I fold?

This is undoubtedly the most important decision in playing hold’em; it is the moment at which you choose whether or not to invest your money in that hand. If you fold your hole cards, it costs you nothing (unless you are in the blind), but you won’t win any money if all you do is fold. Besides, it doesn’t make sense to wait for pocket aces before you invest in a hand. (Pocket aces will be dealt to you only one out of 221 hands, on the average.) So what two hole cards warrant your consideration for making that initial investment? That’s the decision the Hold’em Algorithm was developed to help you make. . .

The Hold’em Algorithm considers most of the key factors (parameters) that are important when deciding whether to invest your money to see the flop. These factors include the value of your two hole cards – rank, pairs, suited, connectors, betting position, number of opponents calling the blind, and whether there have been any raises or are likely to be.

Applying mathematical probabilities to the game of poker is a form of systematic study. It's what a scientist might do to help him make a better decision when confronted with a difficult problem. The Hold'em Algorithm accomplishes this by assigning scores to the key parameters. The player using this algorithm then is availing himself of the opportunity to make the best decision. And, as we all know, poker is a game of decisions; the player who makes the best decisions will win the money! He minimizes the importance of "luck" or chance, which is a random event; and he maximizes the value of his decisions. Of course, in every endeavor there are bound to be exceptions. A "scientist" knows when to make an exception. That too is part of recognizing that poker is a game of science.

Conclusion: Poker is a game of science (knowledge and skill) – using the laws of probability to make the BEST (winning) decisions! The Hold'em Algorithm is a wonderful example of using science to gain an objective: to go home a WINNER!

So, readers what's YOUR opinion?

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