

Haverford College

Structures, the Construction of Meaning, and Subsequent Strategies in Online

Poker

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Contents

Acknowledgements...	3
Introduction...	5
Person vs. House Gambling...	7
Person vs. Person Gambling...	9
Consequences...	11
Overview of Terms...	12
Luck...	19
Personality Systems and Normative Orientations to the Game...	22
Poker Strategy...	25
Alterations to the Poker Game, Reasonable Expectations, and Anomalous Situations...	26
<i>Expectations</i>	28
<i>Anomalous Situations</i>	30
Poker Tells...	34
<i>The Construction of Meaning...</i>	37
<i>The Generalized Other...</i>	50
Third Party Programs...	55
Specific Online Poker Features...	61
<i>Chat Boxes</i>	62
<i>Check-Boxes</i>	68
<i>Multi-Table Gaming</i>	75
<i>Notes</i>	79
<i>Site Statistics</i>	84
<i>Other Observables</i>	86
The Strategic Import of Poker Tells...	87
Conclusion...	89
Bibliography...	92

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Without these three sociology professors, none of the work I have done in this thesis would be possible.

Introduction

During the course of the last ten years the game of poker has become a cultural phenomenon. In large part due to the success ESPN's revamped coverage of the "World Series of Poker Main Event,"¹ poker has taken the United States by storm. Casinos across the nation are expanding their poker rooms, six channels on television² can be found showing poker games at various times during the day, and poker games amongst friends have become a large part of the weekly routine for many Americans. Another consequence of the poker boom has been the emergence of online poker sites as a multi-billion dollar industry, with customers across the world. Online poker rooms offer an easily accessible poker game to anyone with an internet connection who enjoys playing poker from the comfort of their own homes. Stakes in these online poker rooms vary from very low to very high, and the types of players on these sites vary from first-time experimenters to professional online poker players.

Poker is unique in that it is a game of both skill and chance, where money is at stake during every hand. Unlike games such as blackjack, poker requires that one opposes a range of other players unbound by house rules, and playing within the spacious confines of the game itself. The financial component of the game makes understanding the nuances of poker important to any player who wishes to be profitable while playing the game in a casino or online.

In traditional gambling where the structure involved entails person vs. person competition, as opposed to a person playing against the house, a player must rely on

¹ Considered by many to be the pinnacle of all poker tournaments; a ten thousand dollar buy-in tournament culminating in a first prize which now exceeds 12 million dollars. The winner is considered the champion of no limit Texas hold'em for the following year. No limit Texas hold'em is the most popular game in the United States.

² NBC, the Travel Channel, ESPN, ESPN2, Fox Sports, and GSN (Game Show Network)...

observable information to help him make informed decisions. While a person representing a house is limited by constraints imposed upon him by a hierarchical structure, and can only act in a predetermined fashion to protect a profit margin for the house, non-house players have choices that fall over a much larger range, and thus must rely on observable information to reach conclusions about other players' actions if they wish to be successful. This information consists in large part of the demeanor and style of play of other players: facial expressions, verbal tendencies, and betting patterns. The information then filters through a player's frame of reference, dictating what play he will make in a particular situation.

In online gambling scenarios, much of this information becomes inaccessible to players. A player no longer has the ability to construct scenarios using physical tendencies of opponents, but must rely on other criteria to make informed decisions. In this paper, I will examine how meaning is constituted in online player vs. player gambling,³ and subsequent methods by which online players can gain information and use it to succeed in online poker. I will then proceed to articulate certain strategies and the subsequent methods of play that are borne out of access to this information social-structurally, while also briefly examining causes of errors in strategy. I will frame much of my discussion in George Herbert Mead's Mind, Self, and Society.

³ Using online no limit Texas Hold 'em games as an example...

Person vs. House Gambling

To understand what is meant by “constraints imposed upon him by a hierarchical structure...,” I will go into a brief examination of person vs. house gambling scenarios. In these situations, the personality system, and by association, the actions of the person representing the house should be of no interest to a gambler with regard to the fundamentals of how the game is played. Let us consider the classic casino game, blackjack. The dealer has two important jobs; the first is to ensure that the gambler who has come to the casino, particularly to his table, plays within the rules of the game as implemented by the casino.⁴ The second is to execute his role as a participant in the game.

Casinos may vary slightly the rules of the game of blackjack being played; for example, in what situations players can double down, side bet⁵ payouts, etc. These rules are casino-specific and must be enforced by the dealer. Meanwhile, dealers will have a specific “rulebook” to follow with regard to their own play. The standard method of play for dealers would resemble “hit on 16, stay on 17.” By ensuring that dealers are bound by a specific set of rules,⁶ casinos assure themselves a mathematical advantage over players, and thus a profit over time. With regard to this paper, the point of interest is that the

⁴ While the basic rules of blackjack (for example, trying to make a hand closer to 21 than the dealer is without going over) extend beyond the confines of any single casino, casinos may make slight modifications to how blackjack is played within their specific establishments. For example, in what situations a player can double down, split cards, etc.

⁵ Side bets that players can make that are usually not dependant of whether or not a player wins the hand. For example, a bet on whether or not a player is initially dealt two suited cards. Each sidebet will have a specific payout structure set-up by the casino.

⁶ This set of rules constitutes a smaller range than allowed within the confines of a game. For example, in blackjack, a player can hit on any number below 21. However, a casino dealer typically must stand on hard 17, 18, 19, and 20. Soft seventeen is the situation in which a dealer has a total of seven including an ace. For example, 6-A. Dealers will typically hit on soft seventeen, depending on the casino.

particular dealer has no say in how he can play a particular hand, but must adhere to the guidelines set for him by the casino.

To say that gamblers are unaffected by the particulars of the dealer at hand would be misleading. For example, many gamblers will leave a table if they feel a dealer is on a “hot streak,” meaning that he is winning a large majority of the hands being played. However, the individual attributes of the dealer should not have any affect on how a game is played within each particular hand.⁷ That is to say, if a dealer has a certain card showing, and a player knows what two cards are in front of him, and in certain instances the cards of the other players and the cards that have already been dealt in previous hands, the decision whether to hit or stay should be made independent of the attributes of the dealer. Since the dealer is bound within a specific structure of play, this particular structure should be the only attribute of the dealer that is of interest to a player participating in the game.

⁷Although this is admittedly not always the case. For example, if a dealer has been winning a lot of hands and a player at the table is dealt 14 while the dealer is showing a 5, the player may know that the “correct play” from a mathematical perspective is to stand. However, this player may hit in light of the fact that the dealer has made 21 three times in a row. In theory, the past hands should not affect how a player plays in the current hand, except insofar as a player is keeping track of which cards have already been dealt.

Person vs. Person Gambling

In person vs. person gambling, a fundamental constituent of how to play the game is rooted in the personality of a player's opponents. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on no limit Texas hold 'em games as an example of person vs. person gambling scenarios. I will begin by discussing brick and mortar⁸ card rooms. Up to nine people are seated around a table, and cards are dealt to each player. For experienced players the game will often start here, observing how opponents react to the first glimpse of their cards. In person vs. person gambling, there are no structures imposed upon players within the confines of what is legal in the game. During his turn, a player can bet any legal amount, fold, and make a raise at any time throughout the hand, all with any two cards in front of him. A player can attempt a bluff with a weak hand, or decide not to bet with a strong hand to try and trap an opponent. The range of options a player has lies anywhere within the confines of the rules of the game. In blackjack, a casino dealer is prohibited (by the house) from hitting or standing, even when it would be legal⁹ for them to do so. In person vs. person gambling, where no participant in the game represents a house, there are no such prohibitions for players. The house ensures a profit by taking a small percentage of the money wagered in each hand. Thus, non-house players may play as they like,¹⁰ since it is their own money at stake, and the outcome of the hand has no direct bearing on the profits of the casino.¹¹ The ability to act over a much larger range of

⁸ Non-virtual poker rooms, such as the kind found in casinos...

⁹ Within the broader rules of blackjack, where a player is allowed to hit until he makes a hand of 21 or over.

¹⁰ Within the confines of the rules of the game...

¹¹ While the outcome (as in who wins the hand) has no direct bearing on the profits of the casino, typically the larger the pot gets up to a certain point, the larger the "rake," or amount of money wagered in the hand that will be taken by the dealer on behalf of the casino. This is due to the fact that the rake is often manifest as a percentage of the total pot, capped at a certain amount.

choices brings a complex and crucial new element to the game, which requires thought processes that are unnecessary when playing against a house.

Consequences

The lack of constraints seen in person vs. person gambling produces a much more complex situation than that which is seen in person vs. house gambling, where the house is confined to a smaller range of choices, and the dealer can not engage in play reflective of his individual preferences. Each poker player brings a different personality system and normative orientation to the game when he/she sits down at a table. Consequently, each opponent brings a different style of play to the poker game that must be accounted for if he wishes to be consistently successful. The difference in playing styles is so great that throughout the poker world, terms are developed to characterize specific player-types. “Aggressive” and “tight” are used to reference how many hands a player plays, the criteria with which a player decides when to make bets, etc. “On Tilt” is a term used to characterize a player who has had his style of play negatively affected as a result of an event at the poker table. The very fact that terms exist for a multitude of different player-types and situational types of play demonstrates that players’ personalities are a critical element in the poker game.

An essential criterion for playing poker well consists of being able to make judgments about another player’s hand through observables. What has a player done in the past in similar or different situations, how much has this player won/lost recently? Ultimately an action (within the game situation) with knowledge of a particular player to make the most educated guess possible about the meaning of an action will yield the best results for a poker player.

Overview of Terms

In order for this paper to be intelligible to the average reader, there must be an understanding of some of the more basic terms that are used to describe the set-up of a poker game, the actions performed within the game, and player types. Important terms that are not defined in this section will be defined throughout the paper as they are introduced. I will now provide a description of the cards found in a standard deck used for Texas Hold 'em poker games.

A deck of cards used in Texas Hold 'em is made up 52 cards consisting of four suits; diamonds, spades, clubs, and hearts. Each suit is made up of 13 different indexes (2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, J, Q, K, and A)

Card Symbols- The table below shows symbols and the card indexes that correspond to them. The numbers 2-10 (not shown) represent a card of the index corresponding to that number. For example, a flop of 2, 4, 7 with two diamonds, means that a two, four, and seven are dealt, two of which are diamonds.

<u>Symbol</u>	<u>Card</u>
J	Jack
Q	Queen
K	King
A	Ace

Hand Strength- The following is a list of hands in Texas Hold ‘em poker, ordered from the strongest hand (best possible hand) to the weakest.

*Royal Flush*¹² A, K, Q, J, and 10 all of the same suit.

Straight Flush- Five consecutive cards of the same suit. For example;

J-♣10-♣9-♣8-♣7

Four of a Kind- Four cards of the same index.¹³

Full House- Three cards of one index, and two of another. For example;

7-7-7-A-A

Flush- Five cards of the same suit. For example;

♦Q-♦J-♦9-♦3-♦5

Straight -¹⁴ Five consecutive cards of any suit. For example;

3-4-5-6-7

Two Pairs- Two pairs of different card indexes. For example;

9-9-3-3-X, where X is not a 9 or a 3.

One Pair- Two cards of any index.

High Card- The highest card in your five card hand. (McLeod, 2007)

¹² A Royal Flush is the highest possible straight flush, and the best hand in Texas hold ‘em.

¹³ These cards will necessarily be of all different suits.

¹⁴ Note that the ace can also represent the bottom card of the straight, A, 2, 3, 4, 5. However, straights such as Q, K, A, 2, and 3 that contain an ace somewhere in the middle (and not either end) of the progression are not legal in Texas hold ‘em.

Suited- Of the same suit.

Buy-In- Refers to the cost of entering a particular poker game. For no limit games, there will often be a minimum and maximum amount with which you can buy in to the game.

Cash Game- Refers to a table where chips correspond to real dollar amounts. A \$100 max buy-in no limit Texas hold 'em game is an example of a cash game where players can buy in for no more than \$100.

Tournament, *Multi or Single Table-* In tournaments, a player buys in for the particular tournament fee and is given an arbitrary amount of chips. A single table tournament refers to a tournament consisting of only one table of players. A multi-table tournament refers to a tournament comprised of at least two tables of players. A table contains between 8-10 players (short-handed tournaments being the exception). On Pacific Poker, one of the most popular online poker sites, a buy-in to a \$5 tournament gives you \$800 dollars in tournament chips. The tournament continues until every player is knocked out except for one, determining a winner. How a player places in the tournament is a result of when he is knocked out relative to the other players in the tournament. A player is paid according to the tournament pay-out structure, where a certain amount of money is paid to every finisher after only a specific number of players remain in the tournament.

The following is the payout structure on pacific poker for a ten person \$5 +\$1¹⁵ Sit and go tournament, where the +\$1 represents a fee paid to the site in exchange for participating in the tournament.

<i><u>Place Finished</u></i>	<i><u>Payout</u></i>
1 st	\$25
2 nd	\$15
3 rd	\$10
7 th -10 th	\$0

Sit and Go Tournament- The name given to an impromptu tournament beginning when the required amount of people join.

Texas hold'em (No Limit)- A game where a player can bet any amount available to him at any time during the designated betting periods.¹⁶ Players make the best five card hand¹⁷ using two cards dealt to them individually (invisible to other players) and five communal cards¹⁸ that are dealt face-up on the table. To begin, two cards are dealt to

¹⁵ Tournament buy-ins will usually be presented in the format \$x + \$y, Where x represents the buy-in that will be contributed to the total prize pool (the money awarded to people who place high enough in the tournament), and y represents a fee (in dollars) taken by the site in exchange for your entry into the tournament. This second amount will not contribute to the prize pool.

¹⁶ In limit hold'em, there is a fixed amount that one can bet or raise during each betting round. This amount usually doubles after the turn and the river cards are dealt, the fourth and fifth communal cards respectively.

¹⁷ Out of seven total cards that are in play for each player...

¹⁸ Communal cards can be used by any player at the table in order to make the best possible five card hand. They are visible to all players.

each player. There is a round of betting followed by the flop (three community cards dealt face up). Another round of betting ensues before the turn (the fourth communal card) is dealt, followed by the penultimate round of betting before the river card (fifth communal card) is dealt face-up on the table. At this point, all the cards have been dealt and a final round of betting ensues. All betting proceeds in a clock-wise fashion.

Pocket Cards/ Hole Cards- Terms that refer to the two non-communal cards a player is dealt at the beginning of each hand.

Pre-Flop- Term referring to an action performed before the flop (first three communal cards) is dealt.

Blinds- Typically a small and big blind are designated for each hand. Each blind necessitates that a certain amount of money is committed to the pot before any cards are dealt. The blinds rotate in a clock-wise fashion, and are instituted to ensure that people must play a certain number of hands to avoid “Blinding out,” or losing all their money to the blinds. Blinds are raised at certain time intervals during tournaments to ensure that the tournament moves along in a timely fashion. In cash games, blinds are implemented to encourage players to participate in hands more frequently than they otherwise would.

Pot- The name given to the collection of money accumulated from blinds and player bets for a particular hand.

Check- In betting rounds occurring after the flop, if no bet has been made, a player can check (choose not to bet) to the next player. If every player at the table checks, the next is dealt without a bet having been made, and every player at the table sees the next card for free. Before the flop, if no raise is made, the big blind will have the option of checking (seeing the flop for free) since he has already paid the price necessary to enter the hand.

Call- Matching a bet made by another player.

Raise- Increasing a bet that has been made by another player; each player following you will now have to call the total bet¹⁹ to stay in the hand. The minimum allowed raise is twice the initial bet that has been made.

Reraise- Raising a bet that has already been raised at least once. For example, if the cost of the big blind is \$1, player 2 raises the bet to \$4, and player 3 raises the bet to \$6, player 3 has made a reraise.

Going All-in- A situation where a player bets all the money in front of him (either in cash or tournament chips), putting himself at risk to go broke in the particular hand. The player can no longer bet or win any more money than was used to match his bets throughout the hand. Any more betting that occurs in the hand (by his opponents) will go into a “side-pot,” which the player cannot win since he has no more money to contribute to the pot.

¹⁹ The initial bet plus the raise...

Fold- Choosing not to call a bet and forfeiting your hand. All the money you may have already contributed to the pot is now lost to you.

Bad Beat- Terminology referring to a hand where the statistical favorite loses. “Man did you see that bad beat? he lost with pocket Aces to Pocket Kings after he was all in pre-flop.”

Loose- Refers to a player who is particularly apt to call or raise in a given situation; “loose” players tend to play more hands than other players, and win/lose money on a more frequent basis due to their tendency to get involved in more hands.

Tight- Refers to a player who is less likely to call or raise in a given situation. Tight players will typically see fewer flops than other players, and are less likely to get involved in a given hand.

Flush/Straight Draw- The two most common hands to draw to in poker. A draw refers to the fact that a player is looking to make a particular hand, but has not yet made this hand. For example, a person who has a jack and a queen of diamonds in the hole, makes a call and sees a flop of 4, 6, 9 with two diamonds. If he calls any bet, he is on the “flush draw,” or looking to catch another diamond in order to make a flush. People will also often call bets on a straight draw.

Luck

Before proceeding to discuss observables and particular situations in a poker game, the idea of luck must be addressed. Luck is a large part of the poker game, and consequently many people fail to see the tremendous advantage gained by undertaking an intelligent poker strategy. By luck, is meant things that fall out of the control of a player with regard to a particular hand. A prime example occurs within the realm of “no limit Texas Hold’em.” Once a player has put all his money at risk in a hand and has been called by one or more opponents before the river, the results are often²⁰ no longer within his control and are simply dependant upon the remaining cards that are dealt. A player can get all of his money into the pot hand pre-flop with pocket aces,²¹ only to end up getting “unlucky” and losing the hand. The term unlucky typically refers to the fact that a person is a statistical favorite when a key action is performed (such as an all-in or a big raise) and ends up losing the hand. While the luck factor may seem to belittle or even undermine the strategies borne out of this paper, making informed decisions are meant to be profitable in the long run and are not always profitable in the short run. Playing an informed and intelligent style of poker over the long-haul gives a person a huge mathematical advantage over less informed opponents. The luck factor cannot be completely negated, but information about opponents helps to limit the role that luck plays in the long run.

²⁰ Sometimes a player will already be assured that he has the best hand before the river, regardless of the cards that are dealt after this point. Opponents will thus be “drawing dead,” meaning that no cards that are dealt can help them make the best hand; the luck factor will no longer have a bearing on the player who is all-in in this situation.

²¹ The strongest starting hand in poker; pocket aces will have at least an approximately 4:1 advantage over any other starting hand. Often times the mathematical advantage will be much greater.

Let us consider a situation in person vs. house gambling that is analogous to the aforementioned example of the all-in, insofar as a player has no control over the result after a bet is made. In America, a roulette wheel has 38 numbers, 18 of which are red, 18 of which are black, and two of which are green (0 and 00). While a person may bet on red five consecutive times and win each time, he or she is defying the odds. If a player bets on red consecutively over a larger sample size, let us say one thousand spins, the person will almost always come out a loser, since winning pays two to one, but the odds of the player hitting a red number are slightly worse (38:18). Now let us say that the same player gathers some information about the wheel, leading him to believe that over time the wheel has changed so that three of the black numbers on the wheel have become slick; consequently, the ball will almost never land on these numbers. Neglecting these three black numbers, the odds of landing on red becomes 35:18, or slightly better than fifty percent; it is now profitable to bet the red outcome over a long period of time (which pays 2:1). Now, while someone betting on red may lose in the short run, they will almost always win in the long run.

The situation in poker is similar. Let us say that an average player will win fifty percent of the time he sits down at a poker table. Some days his luck is better than normal, tipping the scales in his favor. On these days this player tends to win the hands where he is a mathematical favorite, lose the hands where he is at a disadvantage, and win seven out of ten hands where he is all-in with approximately a fifty percent chance of winning. On the days where the same player is unlucky, he loses six or seven of the ten hands in which he is about fifty percent to win the hand, also called a “race” or “coin-flip” situation.

Now let us take the example of an above average player who makes more informed decisions of when to go all-in at the poker table. He analyzes betting patterns and information available to him on his third party programs, and goes all in ten times during the course of one particular online session, six of which times he is a mathematical favorite. Incorporating the “luck” factor into the equation, it is very possible that this player may lose money during this session. However, over the long-run, assuming a constant or improving skill-level of play the luck factor becomes negligible and this player will be profitable.

Thus while getting unlucky can easily affect the outcome of particular sessions, the skilled player will make a profit over the long-run, assuming he is a better player than his average opponent. Consequently, the articulation of poker strategy and insight into flows of information in the online poker world are of great interest to us from the standpoint of profitability.

Personality Systems and Normative Orientations to the Game

When articulating a poker strategy, so called “anomalous situations,” and a way of analyzing opponents’ tendencies, one has to make assumptions about the normative orientation players bring to a poker game. The typical assumption in poker is that a player wishes to be profitable each time he or she sits down at a poker table, assuming that real money is at stake. While this holds true for a majority of cases, it is admittedly not always the case. Not every player’s primary objective is to be profitable in a game, and this holds more and more weight as one observes lower and lower stakes of play. Low stakes games, such as \$5 maximum buy-in games, are full of players who are more concerned with the excitement of all-ins and aggravating other players with what would traditionally be defined as “bad” game-play than actually being profitable. The distinction between these types of players and inexperienced players is sometimes hard to make, because both player-types often undertake an aggressive and loose style of play. However, whether the game-play is a result of carelessness or inexperience the fact remains that in cheaper buy-in games, there are more people unconcerned with the money at stake²² than in higher stake games, where cash amounts are greater and are thus usually more meaningful to players. That being said, in theory, strategies need to be adjusted to fit the normative orientations of people at a table, especially in lower-limit games.

However, no section of this paper deals specifically with the problem that arises when profitability is not the main goal of an opponent. The “anomalous situations” section of this paper characterizes a type of action that often turns out to be similar to actions executed by a player not concerned with the money at stake. This is because what

²² This refers to the players unconcerned with the money at stake, and not the aforementioned inexperienced poker player whose goal is still to be profitable.

is traditionally defined as “normal” or “good” strategy is defined in terms of an orientation towards being profitable. Thus, situations that are characterized as “anomalous” within this framework will necessarily either be oriented toward a different end than profitability, or be the result of a conceptualization of profitable poker strategy that is characterized by the majority of players as being either abnormal or flawed. With regard to the former, a “good” strategy for winning money is not necessarily a “good” strategy when the end a player is trying to maximize is going all-in every hand, or aggravating other players. This causes a dichotomy that is difficult to address.

I am aware that an “anomalous” action performed by a player who aims to be profitable (but has an atypical conceptualization of a successful poker strategy) does not cater to the same end as an action performed by a player who has no interest in the money at stake, even though these actions may appear to be the same. However, accounting for the player who has a goal different than being profitable is not critical when building a successful online poker strategy

Firstly, the approach to opposing these types of players in a poker game would be similar to that of approaching a player who is performing an “anomalous action” as I will characterize it, and I will provide reasons why anomalous situations do not need to be accounted for in poker strategy. In addition, this type of player is often comparable to the player who in “on tilt,” inexperienced, loose, etc. insofar as they perform similar actions at the poker table (not because they are trying to maximize the same end). One can draw links between how the player who does not care about profitability and one of the player-types characterized in this paper act, if he is struggling to formulate a strategy to play against the former (since I articulate strategies to deal with the latter).

Finally, I will say that beating an opponent who is not affected by losing money is typically easier than beating an opponent who is trying to win money at the poker table. A player certainly has to make some alterations to his strategy, but these alterations are usually quite obvious ones. For example, if an opponent is going all-in every hand because all he cares about is frustrating other players, a player may have to be more patient than normal. However, once a player is dealt a very strong hand, he simply has to wait for the opponent who is going all-in every hand to replicate his action, and then call him. Dealing with these types of opponents can be frustrating, but should not be a major concern of an online poker with regard to being profitable. These players are usually easy to identify, and even if there is a conflation between a traditionally “bad” player and a player who simply doesn’t care about being profitable, this conflation should not harm a strategy that is made to cater to one player type or the other.

Poker Strategy

In order to continue this paper in a meaningful and illuminating way, I must now make assumptions about the usefulness of the poker strategy I am going to articulate and by association the observables I will use to formulate this strategy. While other players may not be interested in the profitability of the poker game, the strategy articulated in this paper will assume profitability as the primary objective of the reader.²³ All the online observables and resources that will be discussed in this paper will be discussed in a manner that illuminates the possibility of gaining a tactical advantage, thereby allowing a poker player to be more profitable in the long-run. Some of the subsequent sections may be meaningless outside of this context. I will also state that in my opinion, “winning,” defined in terms of making money at the poker table is the goal of a large percentage of players who sit down at the poker table. So while this paper may not appeal to all poker players, it is very meaningful within the context of the poker world and does not deal with something that is trivial.

²³ Though other objectives, such as enjoying the game, socializing with other players, etc. are not necessarily unaligned with the goal of being profitable...

Alterations to the Game, Reasonable Expectations, and Anomalous Situations

Characterizing anomalies within the structure of poker-playing is difficult because players bring their own personality systems and normative orientations to each game they participate in. Even having defined the primary objective of poker as being profitable, one action that seems uncharacteristic of profitable poker strategy to one player may seem rather intelligent within the same context to another. Meanwhile, players cannot utilize the same poker strategy at every table because of the variance in the styles of play and objectives of their opponents. Certain players are more aggressive than others, certain players participate in hands with a large number of pre-flop card combinations and others only with a select few, certain players don't care about starting hands as long as the situation dictates the ability to gamble a large amount of money; each player has his/her own style of play.

This having been said, appealing to a "standard method of playing" may seem problematic insofar as there is a huge variation in the way the game of poker is played, even within an aligned set of normative orientations. Even if a standard method of play is defined, this standard tends to change over time. Within this ever-changing structure with many different types of opponents, a player has to constantly define a new set of "reasonable expectations" that will guide his actions during a game.

Expectations- The core concept of poker strategy involves the expectation of what an opponent could possibly hold in his hand. Let us consider the example of someone who is dealt a strong starting hand, raises, and is called by one or more opponents. When this player is called, he must immediately make presumptions about what his opponent holds; what two cards could an opponent have called my raise with? The expectation of what an opponent holds is constructed from two variables; observations of a particular player during the course of the game, and knowledge of the game itself.²⁴

For each situation in a game, a player will have a certain expectation of what an opponent might hold- this expectation is typically manifest as a range of possible hands, which is narrowed as a hand progresses further and further. We can call this range r . The player will have an initial set of expectations based purely on the situations in the game we can call I ,²⁵ and observable information about a player that will alter his range of expectations by an amount, o , where this quantity represents an additional number of hands. Thus there are two simple formulas that a player will use to determine what a player could be holding at any given time, based on the situation in the game and alterations to his normative understanding of the game made through observable information. These formulas, while simple, can serve as a conceptual tool for people who do not have experience with the game of poker.

Loose player: Possibilities = $i + o$

²⁴ For example, knowledge of which starting hands are strong and which are weak in Texas hold 'em. This understanding will help to shape a player's expectation of what hands an opponent could have when calling his preflop raise.

²⁵ i represents a range of possibilities for the typical opponent's starting hand (two hole cards), where a player has no information about the particular player but is only basing his expectations on his knowledge of the game and the situation in the game.

Tight Player: Possibilities = $i - o$.

There are two types of error that occur within the framework of this discussion. These errors are often called “misreads” within the poker world, referring to an incorrect assumption of what an opponent holds. The first type of error occurs when a player makes an incorrect assumption about what his opponent holds, where the opponent’s hand falls within the range r . The second occurs when an opponent’s hand falls outside of the range of expectation.

In the former case, Ego is forced into a situation where he must narrow down the possible hands his opponent may have, ultimately making a determination that falls within the range r , but that is incorrect. Let us take the situation where Ego makes a $5xBB$ ²⁶ raise with pocket queens²⁷ and gets called by one opponent; the flop comes 27K. If his opponent shows strength,²⁸ Ego must decide whether his opponent has a king in his hand, or a hand like 22 or 77, other strong starting hands that fall within the range r . If Ego determines that his opponent has any of these hands, it would be the correct play²⁹ for him to fold his pair of Queens because he has the second best hand and no flush or straight draws. Ego may determine that his opponent has a hand like JJ or 1010, even

²⁶ A raise of five times the price of the big blind.

²⁷ “Pocket Queens” refers to a player having two queens in the hole. Whenever “pocket” is placed before a specific card, it refers to a player’s hole cards. “Pocket sevens” would refer to a player having two sevens in the hole, “pocket tens” two tens, etc.

²⁸ In the form of a large bet... This is important because if Ego’s opponent makes a very small bet, even if Ego believes his Queens are behind in the hand, it may be the correct play (mathematically) to call the bet, since Ego is calling a very small bet to win a (relatively) large amount of money in the pot. This idea of being mathematically inclined to call a bet deals with a term called “pot odds in poker.” It may be the correct play for Ego to make the call even if he feels he is behind, because there is a small chance that another Queen will be dealt, giving Ego a very strong hand (three queens) which would almost always win the pot with a board of 2 7 K Q x, where x represents any card.

²⁹ With one exception; see note 28.

though the possibility of his opponent having a hand like KQ, AK, or JK (hands that are ahead of his two queens) falls within his expected range of possibilities, r . The hand is completed, and Ego's opponent shows AK. Ego has made a misread and loses the hand.

The second type of error occurs in the following situation; Ego makes a 5x BB raise with QQ, and is called by one opponent; the flop comes 2, 7, J. The hand is played out with a 4 dealt on the turn and a 5 on the river, there is betting each time. Finally, Ego's opponent shows 27 off-suit, the winning hand (two-pair). 27 off-suit is the weakest starting hand in poker, and consequently did not fall within Ego's expected range of possible hands his opponent could have called the preflop raise with, r . This opponent is certainly of the $i + o$ type where o represents a relatively large number of hands, and Ego will have to adjust his set of expected possible hands to compensate for this fact.

Anomalous Situations- Defining an anomalous situation can be accomplished in terms of the previous discussion, when a “misread” occurs in the following way; Ego makes a large preflop raise with AK suited in diamonds, and is called by one opponent, Alter. The flop is dealt and the board reads A, K, 7, all of different suits.³⁰ Ego makes a large bet, and Alter calls him. To examine this situation further, we must discuss in some detail the range r . When a player calls a large raise before the flop, the possible hands he may hold almost always consist only of a pair of some kind, two large cards, a suited ace,³¹ or a suited connector or skip-suited connector.³² These hands are all strong starting hands. Hands like AA, KK, and QQ are usually large statistical favorites against other hands, while suited and skip-suited connectors are very good drawing hands.³³ However, after Ego bets the flop and gets called, the range r (Ego’s conceptualization of the hands his opponent could hold) changes based on new observable information, in this case the fact that Alter has called his bet. This call signals something to Ego about what Alter has. Keep this in mind as the example develops.

The turn shows a six of diamonds, the first diamond to be dealt on the board,³⁴ and Ego makes a large bet which Alter calls. Finally, the river brings a two of clubs; Ego makes another large bet, Alter thinks (perhaps contemplating a raise), and decides to

³⁰ Also known is a “rainbow.” An alternative name for this flop would thus be “A, K, 7, rainbow.”

³¹ Ace-x of the same suit, where x represents any possible card index other than an ace.

³² For example, 6-7 and 6-8 suited respectively.

³³ Hands that are relatively likely (compared to other starting hands) to make a flush or straight. Drawing hands are valuable because if a player makes a straight or flush, this is a very tough hand for an opponent to beat. In addition, these types of hands play well in pots with multiple participants, because often times these participants will all possess high cards in their hands, meaning that a hand like 6-7 suited is more likely to pair than higher cards which are possessed by multiple players. In addition, if a flop like 6, 7, 7 is dealt, someone who made a preflop raise with a hand like pocket aces would be unlikely to assume his opponent called a raise (and this has to do with the variable r) with a 7 in their hand, then they would with higher cards in their hand.

³⁴ The “board” is a term referring to the communal cards that have been dealt up to a particular point in a hand.

make the call. Ego shows his top two-pair and Alter show his hole cards, pocket twos, for three of a kind (twos). Alter wins the pot.

In this situation, the board dictated that almost any hand that Ego could have raised with pre-flop and bet with after the flop and turn cards, would have beaten Alter's hand. Any pocket pair, ace, king, seven, six, or combination of these cards would have beaten Alter's pair of twos at the time of Ego's bets. Ego assumed that his ace-king was the best hand, and was correct until the river card was dealt. This situation, which I will characterize as "anomalous" for the purposes of this paper, is in some ways similar to the example of "bad luck" presented in a previous section of this paper. Ego has not made a misread as I have defined them until the river card was dealt; he constructed a range, r , and decided that although Alter could possess a hand (within the range r) that was stronger after the flop than his ace-king, that he did not. This was the correct read until the river, when Alter caught another 2, a one in twenty occurrence.

In addition, none of Alter's actions indicated to Ego that Alter was ahead of him in the hand before the river; Alter did not raise, and Ego did not feel that he was being trapped (induced to bet) with a weaker hand than Alter. Ego made the correct reads, and was a victim of chance on the river. This situation is "anomalous" for the following reason; considering the situation Alter was in, a very small percentage of players would have called Ego's bet after the flop, and an even smaller percentage would have called both the bet after the flop and then the larger bet on the turn.³⁵ In other words, the course

³⁵ Increasing a bet is usually an indicator that a player has a strong hand. Unless other information falling outside of the conduct and situation of the game is available, a player in Alter's situation would, according to the large majority of player's conceptualizations of the variable r , normally have no reason to believe a) that his pair of twos was the best hand at the time or b) that he could call Ego's bets in order to successfully bluff him later. These would have been the two reasons

of action within the particular situation was a very rare occurrence in poker. Accounting for these very rare sequences of actions would do more harm to a poker strategy than good, insofar as it would probably cause more misreads (since the situation is in fact so rare) than correct reads.

We can thus define an “anomalous” situation as a situation where an opponent plays in a fashion not dictated by a very large percentage of player’s conceptualizations of the variable r , which in turn indicates the “correct” or “incorrect” response to players, based on the context in which an opponent’s action is being performed.³⁶ For the purposes of conceptualizing these anomalous situations within this current discussion, we can confine the variables that influence anomalous decisions simply to conduct and the situation in the game.³⁷ Anomalous situations need to be accounted for in this paper because while they do occur in the online poker world, correcting a poker strategy to account for them would not be profitable over the long run for two reasons; the rate of occurrence of these situations is extremely low, and aside from the sheer rarity of the sequences of actions that fall under the umbrella of “anomalous actions” as we have defined them, Ego would win 90% of the hands in which Alter acted this way (even

why Alter would call Ego’s bets, assuming that he wanted to win the hand and was not affected by some other circumstance or condition, such as being on tilt, or seeing the cards incorrectly, etc.

³⁶ For example, an action may be dictated by either an abstract or (relatively) concise understanding of the game and the math which governs probabilities, depending on the opponent. In the former case, almost all players will know not to call an all-in with a pair of twos after the river card is dealt and the board reads J, 10, A, K, 6. In other situations, such as calling all-ins on flush draws, the understanding of the game is more nuanced (the probabilities of winning are not as obvious) and there will be more variance in the way players play, according to the level of their understandings of the game.

³⁷ The anomalous action was not influenced by some incorrect interpretation of a player’s personality system or other observable information outside of the conduct and situation within the game.

though he has misinterpreted what cards Alter held).³⁸ This means that Ego would not even need to account for Alter's actions over the long run to be profitable in situations where opponents act anomalously. Anomalous action can thus be excluded from the articulation of a successful poker strategy.

This example is the closest we can come to defining an "anomalous" situation in the poker world. It is a play that defies most poker logic, but some potential reasons for this type of play are of interest to us when articulating a poker strategy, and will be discussed later on because they can be useful indicators of an opponent's position in a hand even outside the context of anomalous situations. I will now proceed to introduce poker tells and a discussion of meaning. This discussion will act as a precursor to my discussion of online poker observables.

³⁸ The odds of another 2 being dealt will be 10% or less, depending on whether another player in the hand has folded a 2 (a folded card can not be dealt as a communal card).

Poker Tells

Someone observing the game of poker will often hear the term “tell” being used. A “tell” is an observable attribute of a player that gives opponents information as to what cards he may hold in a particular hand (helping to construct the range, r). A “tell” can be as simple as a minute facial expression, or as complicated as analyzing a person’s betting patterns and past tendencies. Either way, tells are of the utmost importance in brick and mortar card rooms because they can provide an opposing player with a huge tactical advantage in a specific hand and/or over a large period of time. Thus, the issue becomes whether or not tells can be observed in online poker scenarios. While certain tells (for example, facial expressions) are no longer accessible in the online medium, there are many tells that are still observable when playing poker online. Some of these tells may even be more accessible online,³⁹ or exclusive to the online medium (for example, the usage of “check-boxes” that will be discussed shortly). Thus a discussion of poker tells should be a focal point for anyone constructing an online poker strategy, or in this case a thesis on online poker.

Following my brief discussion of poker tells, this section will focus on meaning and online poker observables that can be used to gain a tactical advantage over opponents in a poker game. I will ground the initial discussion of meaning in the theory George Herbert Mead constructs in Mind, Self, and Society, and proceed to discuss whether or not Mead’s theory provides us with a useful framework within which we can analyze meaning in the online poker world. I will also discuss whether or not I believe Mead’s

³⁹ For example, due to statistics you can access that may illuminate certain aspects of a poker player’s game, and that you will not have access to in brick and mortar card rooms.

theory is adequate to characterize the constitution of meaning in actions at the poker table, and subsequently more generally.

For the purposes of this paper, I will divide poker tells into two categories, intentional and unintentional actions. The sphere of unintentional actions includes any action that is carried out without a purpose or goal in mind; these types of actions can also be thought of as subconscious or “meaningless.”⁴⁰ They are a product of the circumstances, but there is no deliberative process that gives rise to them although they may be visible to other players.⁴¹ One example of this type of action is the twitch of a player’s eye, occurring every time that that particular player is dealt a very strong starting hand.

This clarification is important because some “intentional actions” will have unintentional consequences even though they are done consciously (these actions differ from the type of action described in the previous paragraph). For example, an inexperienced player may intentionally shake his head after the river card is dealt attempting to convey that this card was of no help to him, but unintentionally making it obvious to his opponents at the table that he has made a strong hand; these actions are not unintentional as per our previous definition and are still of interest to us even though the player has miscalculated the resultant effect that his action will have

Unintentional actions as we have defined them are not of great interest in a sociology paper, since it would not be particularly illuminating to construct sociologically the situations in which these actions occur. Let us say that an opponent realizes that Ego unintentionally squints every time he is bluffing (in a brick and mortar poker room), this

⁴⁰ In terms of the way in which meaning will be defined shortly...

⁴¹ While these actions are not the result of a deliberative process, opponents can still use them to gain a tactical advantage.

action is of interest to an opponent, but no further analysis is needed to determine what the action means, or more specifically what the action was meant to convey (assuming that it is in fact unintentional, and thus not meant to be deceptive).

Actions that are of interest to us in this paper are intentional actions, by which is meant actions that are performed willingly by a player to attempt to maximize an end,⁴² and that can be interpreted by other players in a strategically useful way. These types of action are a specific subcategory of poker tells, and are almost always meant to be deceptive at a poker table. Ego bets quickly intending to show strength when he is weak, or Alter checks instantly, attempting to feign weakness when he is very strong. We can attempt to construct the systems of meaning constituted by these actions sociologically. By figuring out what a player attempts to convey through a particular action, an opponent may determine the actual strength of a player's hand, and subsequently make an informed decision about how to proceed in the particular situation.⁴³

⁴² In this paper, this end is assumed to be being profitable....

⁴³ This is why an analysis of these actions is in fact important.

Construction of Meaning- For the purposes of this discussion, I will now turn to George Herbert Mead's discussion of meaning in Mind, Self, and Sociology. The italicized text is of particular interest when analyzing poker tells.

“We are particularly concerned with intelligence on the human level, that is, with the adjustment to one another of the acts of different human individuals within the human social process; an adjustment which take place through communication... The central factor in such adjustment is ‘meaning.’ *Meaning arises and lies within the field of the relation between the gesture of a given human organism and the subsequent behavior of the organism as indicated to another human organism by that gesture.* If that gesture does so indicate to another organism the subsequent (or resultant) behavior of the given organism, then it has meaning. In other words, the relationship between a given stimulus- as a gesture- and the later phases of the social act of which it is an early (if not an initial) phase constitutes the field within which meaning originates and exists...

“The gesture stands for a certain resultant of the social act, a resultant to which there is a definite response on the part of the individuals involved therein; so that meaning is stated in terms of response. Meaning is implicit- if not always explicit- in the relationship among the various phases of the social act to which it refers, and out of which it develops.” (Mead 76)

While Mead's discussion of meaning may or may not be adequate to describe a set of actions at a poker table, it is a useful framework within which we can begin to carry out our discussion of meaning as constituted by poker tells; we can then proceed to dive into an analysis of whether or not the theory is in fact adequate. To help characterize Mead's conceptualization of meaning, I will refer to several brief analyses in Gould's “Culture, Personality, and Emotion in George Herbert Mead.”

“If ego holds out her hand to alter, alter may shake ego's hand. If so, alter acts in expectation of ego's response to alter's gesture, as that response by ego is signaled by ego's original gesture.” (Gould 7)

Ego performs an action; Alter responds to the gesture in expectation of Ego's reciprocal response. Meaning only arises when Ego's initial action indicates something to Alter about how Ego will respond to Alter's reciprocal action.

During a poker game, Ego will perform an action attempting to convey something to Alter about how he will respond to the response to his initial action. The way that the initial action (and subsequently, how Ego will react to Alter's reciprocal gesture) is interpreted by Alter determines how meaning is constituted in a particular situation at the poker table. As a result, Ego may attempt to construct meaning (which is deceptive) that will be beneficial to him depending on the particular situation. In these instances, Ego's action will be shaped by how he thinks Alter will react to his initial gesture in anticipation of his reciprocal response. The diagram below represents a linear account of the actions that occur within this conceptualization of meaning.

Ego's Initial Gesture → Alter's Response⁴⁴ → Ego's Reciprocal Response⁴⁵

As a poker player, the object becomes interpreting your opponent's actions in the "correct" way,⁴⁶ presumably a different way than is intended by your opponent who is attempting to maximize his profits at the table, a goal adverse to yours. The strategic nature of actions at a poker table creates an interesting and complicated dynamic within subsequent interactions in the poker game. This complicates the conceptualization of how meaning is constituted in online poker situations, where the initial action of a player is usually thought of as having strategic import. As a result the construction of meaning in

⁴⁴ In anticipation of the third step in the process which Mead calls the "resultant gesture," or "Ego's reciprocal response" as stated above. Ego's initial gesture signals something to Alter about his subsequent resultant gesture.

⁴⁵ Usually, but not necessarily a response to the second step of the process as signaled by the initial gesture. This will be discussed in more detail later in the paper.

⁴⁶ In the way that will allow you to make the correct play in the hand, with regard to maximizing your profit or minimizing your losses.

these scenarios can become very complex, depending on both the situational circumstances and the type of players participating in the interaction.

While we have characterized differences between loose and tight players and some other player types, these characteristics are not necessarily indicators of the overall skill level of an opponent. While an opponent may be playing loosely and/or aggressively, this does not necessarily mean he is not executing a strategy that is successful over time. In addition to different playing styles, experienced and skilled poker players will use observable information to incorporate the personality systems of other players into their strategy, as well as consider how the meaning of actions is made manifest when governed by a particular cultural logic, in this case a “poker logic.”

Players can perform an action that seems weak when they are strong to attempt to trap more aggressive players. Players can feign strength when they are weak against tighter players to try and steal pots away from them. These processes can become considerably more complex: Ego may perform an action that feigns weakness expecting Alter to interpret this action as strength,⁴⁷ hoping to get Alter to lay down a hand when he is actually weak. This process can continue on and vary depending on how a player expects a particular opponent to interpret his action.⁴⁸ I will now endeavor to articulate an example of how this process is manifest at a poker table.

A flop⁴⁹ comes 3, 6, 8, all diamonds. Ego holds the king of clubs and the ace of diamonds in his hand, in position⁵⁰ against Alter. Ego has already determined that Alter is

⁴⁷ Since he is aware that Ego’s actions will often be deceptive... In addition, good players will be sure to keep a mental (or physical) note of specific hands in the past. Notes on specific players can be created through a feature on all online poker sites, and can have an affect on the processes by which meaning is constituted. Notes will be discussed later on in this section of the paper.

⁴⁸ The complexity of this process of interpretation is directly related to the concept of a “misread,” which I touched upon earlier.

⁴⁹ The first three communal cards that are dealt...

a tight player, perhaps overly so; he sees that Alter's "percentage of flops seen" statistic⁵¹ is very small and that Alter seems to win most the hands he remains in. Ego has also observed from several prior hands that Alter is averse to calling big bets unless he has the nuts.⁵² Ego calls two big bets made by Alter on the flush draw, and in position. The turn and river cards⁵³ are of no help to Ego (no ace, king, or diamond is dealt). Alter checks on the river, and Ego bets \$14 with high card ace; Alter thinks for a while and folds. Ego shows his bluff⁵⁴.

Half an hour later at the same table, Ego calls a preflop raise by Alter in position, and flops an ace high diamond flush (the strongest possible hand considering the communal cards in play). Ego calls two big bets made by Alter and doesn't raise, hoping to keep Alter in the hand as long as possible to try and maximize his profits. The turn and river once more bring no diamond and/or high card and Alter checks. Ego realizes that although Alter's check shows some weakness on his part, it may appear to Alter that Ego has missed his flush once again. Ego bets \$14, the same bet he made half an hour ago

⁵⁰ Is last to bet.

⁵¹ This statistic will be discussed in greater detail later on in this section, but refers to how often a player folds (or doesn't fold) before the first three communal cards are dealt. This statistic is often a good indicator of how "loose" or "tight" a player is.

⁵² "The nuts" refers to the best possible hand, but is also often used to refer to a very good hand that seemingly can't be beat given the situation. For example, when someone makes a king high flush on the river after calling two big bets from an opponent, they have reason to believe they have the best hand; they will often refer to the king high flush as the nuts at this point, even though theoretically an ace high flush could beat them.

⁵³ The last two communal cards that are dealt...

⁵⁴ When player 2 folds, player 1 does not have to show his cards. However, most sites will have an option that allows a player to "show" or "muck" his hand in such a situation, where "muck" refers to player 1 ending the hand without showing his cards. The word muck comes from brick and mortar card games, where the "muck" is a term referring to a collection of all the folded cards. Reasons to show cards vary; the reasons can be strategic, such as the above example will illustrate. However, many players will show their cards simply to gloat if they have executed a successful bluff, or conversely (if they were not bluffing), to show an opponent that he or she has made a good fold in a given situation. The latter is often seen as a sign of respect and/or good sportsmanship, although not showing cards is not necessarily a display of bad sportsmanship and is the more common occurrence.

when bluffing at the pot. This time Alter calls, determined that Ego is bluffing and not to be fooled again. Ego turns over the winning hand.

In the aforementioned example, Ego performs the same action twice. Both times he aims to be deceptive, but the second time his deception hinges on using the situation in the game, as well as past experience to his advantage. Alter responds in two different ways to the same initial action; in this situation, meaning is constituted by the relationship of conduct with reference to a particular situation within the game. The way that Alter interprets Ego's action seems to indicate that the system of meaning is perfectly consistent with Mead's theory. Ego performs an initial action. Alter responds according to the way he believes Ego's initial gestures indicates the strength of his hand, and consequently how Ego will react to Alter's initial response (or in this case, what the result of the hand will be if Alter responds a certain way to Ego's initial action).

The value of using Mead's theory as a framework to carry out examples is twofold; Mead's theory can lend clarity to and/or teach us about how meaning is constituted in specific interactions at the poker table.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, the problematization of Mead's theory can force us to characterize certain elements that are present in online poker interactions that are not explicitly stated in or incorporated into Mead's theory, and subsequently allow us to understand these elements better and to form a new theory of meaning, if we so choose. However, to show that Mead's theory is not adequate to characterize *all* actions at a poker table, we need to come up with a slightly more complex example meaningful interaction.

⁵⁵ This understanding can then be extended to other situations.

I will now revert back to Mead's discussion of meaning before proceeding to provide this example. Gould provides us with one example where he believes that Mead's trifold relationship of meaning is not adequate to characterize the situation.

“Imagine ego extending her hand to alter. Ego intends this gesture to be interpreted as an act of friendship. Alter interprets it in this conventional way and extends his hand in return. Ego grabs alter's hand, twists it behind alter's back and puts a knife to his throat, demanding his wallet. Can we say that the meaning of ego's original gesture was her response to alter's response, that she wanted to rob alter? I do not think so. Instead we have to recognize that ego's original gesture was meaningful in terms of shared cultural norms, defining what is intelligible, and ego manipulated that meaning to rob alter. This manipulation would not have been possible in the absence of this shared normative orientation, a normative orientation irreducible to conduct.” (Gould 8)

In Gould's example, Ego extends his hand to Alter anticipating Alter's reaction to his initial gesture while intending a completely different outcome than is indicated to Alter by his initial action.⁵⁶ Ego intends to rob Alter assuming that Alter will interpret his initial gesture as one of good will; a trap is set. However, meaning here is not simply reducible to Ego's action within a particular situation. Ego must appeal to a cultural logic that governs how he believes Alter will react to his initial action in anticipation of the resultant gesture. This cultural logic falls outside the parameters set by Mead's theory.

The reason that a shared cultural norm is necessary to account for Alter's reaction to Ego's initial gesture is because the meaning of a hand-shake is not reducible to the hand-shake itself within the situation in which it occurs.⁵⁷ Thus, in order to show that Mead's theory is inadequate to characterize all poker interactions (which I have claimed is in fact the case) I will now attempt to characterize an online poker action that

⁵⁶ Note however, that the linear sequence of actions has not changed from the diagram I presented.

⁵⁷ This will be elaborated upon shortly.

necessarily appeals to a cultural logic to be tangible to other players, constituting a system of meaning within the particular exchange. A brief excerpt from Gould's work will help us to better characterize elements that need to be present in this example.

“Mead focuses on the cognitive aspects of interaction and his theory obscures the fact that decisions are often made on emotional grounds, that both ends and means may be selected emotionally. Viable theories of personality and culture must recognize that both culture and personality embody an affectual dimension that sometimes dominates rational choice, and a viable social theory of social interactions must incorporate more subtle theories of culture and personality...” (Gould 3)

Ego sits down at a poker table determined to execute a specific strategy. His strategy is as follows. Ego will buy in at a \$500 no limit hold ‘em table, and dump⁵⁸ money to one of the opponents at his table either by making a large call on the river with a weak hand, or betting large when he knows his opponent has a strong hand (a better hand) and will call him, whichever opportunity should arise first. Ego is willing to sacrifice \$50-\$100 to execute this play, in the hopes that he will construct a certain image of himself at the table;⁵⁹ specifically, that he is an inexperienced and/or unskilled player. In addition, after losing his money, Ego will attempt to convince his opponents that he is on tilt.⁶⁰ Ego can do this by uttering profanities in the chat box, asking his opponent what he was doing and/or thinking in the hand in which he lost, saying he will raise the next five hands in the dark,⁶¹ etc. Having portrayed an image both of being a poor and/or

⁵⁸ Intentionally lose...

⁵⁹ This concept is often referred to as “advertising” in the poker world. A player will “advertise” to construct a certain image of himself that he hopes will pay dividends later on at the same table, where his opponents have witnessed the act of advertising.

⁶⁰ Has lost control of his emotions as result of losing a large hand... This is important because being on tilt, by definition affects one's play.

⁶¹ Without having looked at his hole cards.

inexperienced player,⁶² and of being on tilt as a result of losing, Ego hopes that players will begin calling/raising him with weaker hands than they normally would. That is to say, Ego hopes that his opponents will now play differently against him because of the self-image he has constructed,⁶³ in a way that Ego believes will benefit him.

While the methods by which Ego can construct a desired image of himself are interesting in and of themselves (for example, intentionally dumping money to his opponents), what is important here is whether or not Ego would be able to construct this image in a way that would be meaningful to other players⁶⁴ without relying on the incorporation of his personality system into the reaction of his opponents (to Ego's initial gestures at the poker table), and without appealing to a shared cultural norm, or "poker logic." I will claim that he cannot, and that as a consequence Mead's theory is inadequate when it is used to frame some interactions on online poker sites.

Upon first glance it seems that Mead's trifold relationship of meaning is adequate to characterize what is occurring here. Once Ego has constructed the self-image he desires, he will perform actions that he intends will convey something about his reciprocal response to his opponents' responses at the poker table. However, where Mead's theory falls short is in the fact that the meaning of the initial gesture is not reducible to the gesture itself within a given situational circumstance, but is influenced by

⁶² In this example, the two amount to almost the same thing for the purposes of how opponents tend to view the player.

⁶³ For example, Alter will make a huge bet on the river with a very good hand; players will call this bet because they think he is on tilt and is bluffing or betting with a weak hand. Players may also be more likely to call Alter's preflop raises because they think he is on tilt, also referred to as "steaming," from the previous loss he absorbed. In addition, the image Alter has constructed as a "bad player" will have other players underestimating his talents, and presumably trying to outplay him when the situation does not dictate that they should attempt to do so. We can conceptualize many situations where the image Alter has constructed would allow him to profit when he otherwise wouldn't have.

⁶⁴ In the way in which Ego intends...

Ego's personality system, and governed by a cultural logic that falls outside of the parameters of the particular interaction. For Ego to feign being on tilt, and to have this benefit him at the poker table, Ego must first construct the image of being an inexperienced player successfully. This image must then be incorporated into the way opponents interpret his initial actions. In addition, Alter must appeal to an "online poker cultural logic" that lends meaning to actions that would otherwise be unintelligible. An opponent who only has an understanding of the rules of the poker game would not be affected by Ego's actions the same way as an opponent who understands "poker culture."⁶⁵

⁶⁵ This example is interesting and unique insofar that this strategy tends to work better against more experienced players. In poker, certain strategies appeal to nuances in the game that are typically understood only by relatively experienced players. Less experienced players are less likely to factor certain information, such as being on tilt, into the way they play against their opponents. Professional players often have trouble against less experienced players for this very reason, where their strategies lose the effectiveness they would have against "better" players.

One aspect of the poker game commonly affected by this phenomenon is bluffing. A professional player, John, has \$100 at a table, and believes his opponent (another professional player) is on a flush draw after the flop. There is already \$20 in the pot from the preflop bets that have occurred. John's opponent bets \$10, and John decides to trust his instincts and make an all-in bluff on top of the \$10 bet that his opponent has just made, even though he only has 10 high. His opponent who knows the game well will understand that he only has about a 25% chance of making his flush. He would be calling another \$90 to try to win the \$30 now in the pot, plus the \$90 reraise. Odds dictate that mathematically, this would be the wrong call, and the opponent folds.

However, a less experienced player who does not have a good understanding of the game may very well call the bet intent on making his flush without understanding that he does not have the "right odds" (called pot odds) to make the call, and that his high card is actually the best hand in the situation. The more inexperienced opponent calls, and the professional is distraught. John, who has no pair and no draw, is now a huge underdog to win the hand against the flush draw and a higher high card.

This all ties into the cultural logic that dictates some understandings at a poker table, as well as the multiple levels on which players understand the game of poker. Less experienced players are typically less likely to appeal to the cultural context of poker to construct meaning, and have a lesser understanding of the game. This creates a very interesting situation for more experienced players who are trying to manipulate them. These experienced players may now have to execute strategies that are based more on actions within the game performed in certain situations, and less based on cultural logic and (their own) personality systems, to construct meaning that will benefit them against their more inexperienced opponents.

In Gould's example, Alter is successfully duped by Ego because of the shared cultural understanding that indicates to Alter what Ego's initial gesture, holding out his hand, represents. This shared cultural understanding is what leads Ego to presume that Alter will shake his hand when the initial gesture is made to Alter. I will now provide a slightly different example that serves to clarify this point.

Let us say that in country A, it is common for friends to jump once into the air and then spin around twice to greet each other. Now Aaron, who is from country A, vacations to country B, in which hand shaking is the customary greeting. Aaron meets his tour group in country B with a smile, jumps into the air, and then spins around twice, attempting to be polite. The tour guide instinctively backs away and calls security. Aaron has appealed to a cultural logic that no longer governs his situation; the action no longer has meaning.⁶⁶ In Gould's example, Ego's ability to trick Alter hinges on the fact that shaking hands is a common custom governed by the cultural logic under which the action is operating.

Similarly,⁶⁷ if Ego intends to convey that he is on tilt to affect the way his opponents play against him, his ability to execute this strategy hinges on his opponents' ability to interpret his actions meaningfully. Ego is now appealing to a poker subculture that governs the understanding of players at the poker table.⁶⁸ If Alter reduces Ego's

⁶⁶ Insofar as it is intended to be a greeting; people may however interpret the action to mean something else.

⁶⁷ Although the poker example may appeal to a poker "subculture," as opposed to a broader culture represented in the handshake example, the understanding is still based on a shared "cultural" understanding of some kind.

⁶⁸ The more experience players at the table have with the game of poker, the more they will share an understanding of this subculture.

actions to the conduct itself within a given situation in the poker game,⁶⁹ Ego will not be able to execute his strategy because being “on tilt” will not be intelligible to Alter.

In addition, it is quite simple to illustrate that both a shared culture and personality systems are not trivial in online poker interactions, but are a large part of the poker game that must be accounted for if a player wishes to be consistently successful. I will now provide examples that I feel are representative of common occurrences in poker and that demonstrate that both a cultural logic and personality systems commonly have important affects on how meaning is interpreted at the poker table.

Alter is a very tight player; he usually looks for situations where he has a very strong hand to get his money into the pot. He chooses not to take a lot of risks, and looks to stay out of situations where he believes he is about 50/50 to win the hand. Although he is a conservative player, Alter is a skilled player who looks for any advantages he can gain over his opponents. In this particular instance, Alter observes Ego losing \$100, a full buy-in at a \$100 Max no limit hold’ em table with pocket aces, all in before the flop; Ego has just taken a bad beat. Before this hand, Alter had already observed that Ego was a very aggressive player who often raised pots and showed bluffs that he executed on the river.

Immediately after Ego takes the bad beat, Alter observes him typing profanity in the chat box; he makes a mental note of this. After making a full rebuy,⁷⁰ Ego immediately raises the next three pots from \$1 to \$7 before the flop. Ego wins these pots either before the flop, or with bets after the flop that force out his opponents. His chip stack is now up to \$115. On the fourth hand after the bad beat occurs, Ego and Alter get

⁶⁹ While failing to consider the previous hands, Ego’s style of play, how being “on tilt” affects a player’s actions at the poker table, etc.

⁷⁰ Buying in for another \$100, the maximum allowed buy-in at the table.

involved. Ego raises to \$8 before the flop, and then bets \$15 after the flop; both times he is called by Alter. However, both players check after the turn. After the river card is dealt, the board reads K, K, 9, 10, 2, with the second and third cards suited in diamonds. Ego, who is first to act, bets \$15 during the final betting round. Alter has A9, and knows a king, ten, pocket twos, or higher pocket pair beats him; but he makes the call. Ego shows 2-3 suited in diamonds, and Alter wins the hand.

In this situation, what Ego's initial gestures⁷¹ conveyed to Alter was not reducible to conduct within the given situational circumstance, but was also constituted by Alter's understanding of both Ego's personality system and the cultural logic under which the actions were occurring. Conversely, if Alter had had no information about Ego prior to this hand,⁷² whether or not he would have called any of Ego's bets would have been reducible to the conduct and the situational circumstance.⁷³ While Alter could have made a decision based simply on these facts,⁷⁴ this was probably not the case. Alter, a tight player, would usually fold A9 in the situations highlighted in this example (before the flop, after the flop, and after the river card). This leads us to believe that if Alter did not have other knowledge about his opponent, the way he interpreted Ego's initial gesture would have been different.

Alter understood that within the poker world, Ego's actions outside of the hand⁷⁵ were often indicative of someone who is on tilt. He also understood how "being on tilt" commonly affects the way in which someone will play. Alter then combined this

⁷¹ The \$8 preflop raise and the \$15 dollar bet after the flop and the river card.

⁷² For example, he had just sat down at the table and had not witnessed the bad beat that Ego took, or the aggressive style with which he had played.

⁷³ The situation in the game within which the bet is carried out.

⁷⁴ Though be it, a much less informed decision...

⁷⁵ His manner of chatting, the way in which he had lost a previous hand, etc.

knowledge with the specific actions during the game that occurred in particular situations to attach meaning to Ego's initial gesture. The meaning of Ego's initial action is now constituted by the conduct itself, the situational circumstance under which it falls, Ego's personality system, and the shared cultural norm which governs interactions at the poker table.

This example of being able to adjust your play to suit the personality system of an opponent is indicative of a critical skill that one must possess to be successful at the game of poker. It is not simply a trivial example. There are a tremendous range of personalities at almost any given poker table, and different personality-types will play differently. If Alter plays very tight against other very tight players, he is missing a great opportunity to be more aggressive and pick up lots of smaller pots.⁷⁶ Conversely, if Alter varies his style of play against more aggressive opponents and is slightly more patient before making a large bet or raise, he stands to get his money into the pot with the best hand and make a lot of money.⁷⁷ The utilization of personality systems in the way meaning is constructed during a hand is a critical element in poker strategy. In addition, Alter may lose a chance to make a lot of money when he catches Ego on tilt and fails to alter his style of play to account for this information through an understanding of poker culture.

Personality systems and a cultural logic need to be accounted for when analyzing interactions at a poker table, and Mead's theory falls short insofar as he does not explicitly account for either.

⁷⁶ Tight players will typically fold a lot of hands, and wait to have very strong hands before risking a lot of money.

⁷⁷ More aggressive players will typically call and raise with weaker hands than more conservative players would.

The “Generalized Other”-To make the claim that Mead’s theory of meaning is inadequate to account for both personality systems and a cultural logic that are necessary to characterize the construction of meaning in certain interactions, a discussion of Mead’s characterization of the “generalized other” in Mind, Self, and Society is necessary. Specifically, it must be shown that Mead’s conceptualization of the “generalized other” does not account for conduct that manipulates cultural norms or for the construction of meaning that is (at least in part) attributable to the personality system of the actor performing the initial action.

“The fundamental difference between the game and play is that in [the former] the child must have the attitude of all the others involved in that game. The attitudes of other players which the participant assumes organize into a sort of unit, and it is that organization which controls the response of the individual. The illustration used was of a person playing baseball. Each one of his own acts is determined by his assumption of the action of the others who are playing the game. What he does is controlled by his being everyone else on that team, at least in so far as those attitudes affect his own particular response. We get then an ‘other’ which is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process.

“The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called ‘the generalized other. The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community. Thus, for example, in the case of such a social group as a ball team, the team is the generalized other in so far as it enters-- as an organized process or social activity-- into the experience of any one of the individual members of it.” (Mead 153-154)

Mead asserts that the generalized other is the form in which “the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual’s thinking.” (Mead 155) The individual “takes or assumes” (Mead 156) a set of social attitudes as constituted by a social group, and addresses social situations with an orientation that is constituted, at least in part, by these attitudes. He assumes that the conceptualization of the generalized other occurs “without reference to its expression in any particular other individuals,”

(Mead 156) but only insofar as each attitude contributes toward the formation of a whole unit, which is then considered in its totality by an individual.

The conceptualization of the generalized other in Mind, Self, and Society is a difficult one to unpack, and as a result I will now provide a passage from Mead that may help us to illuminate the role of the generalized other in the development of the self, and subsequently in its construction of meaning. The italicized text is of key importance when characterizing the generalized other.

“I have pointed out, then, that there are two general stages in the full development of the self. At the first of these stages, the individual’s self is constituted simply by an organization of the particular attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another in the specific social acts in which he participates with them. But at the second stage in the full development of the individual’s self that self is constituted not only by an organization of these particular individual attitudes, *but also by an organization of the social attitudes of the generalized other or the social group as a whole to which he belongs.* These social or group attitudes are brought within the individual’s field of direct experience, and are included as elements in the structure or constitution of his self, in the same way that the attitudes of particular other individuals are; and the individual arrives at them, or succeeds in taking them, by means of further organizing, and then generalizing, the attitudes of particular other individuals in terms of their organized social bearings and implications.” (Mead 158)

The second stage of the development of the self shifts from a consideration of the individual attitudes of actors within “specific social acts,” (Mead 158) to a consideration of the attitudes of the generalized other, which is reflective of the entire social group within which an actor is operating. Upon entering this stage of development, an individual incorporates the generalized other into his direct “field of experience,” drawing upon his conceptualization of the generalized other to shape subsequent conduct. Mead sites the example of a political affiliation. Ego joins a political party, and upon doing so comes to embody certain attitudes that are not representative of any particular

actor operating within the party, but of the party as a whole. Within this political party, Ego will now act with the generalized other in mind. His conceptualization of the attitudes embodied by the generalized other will combine with a personal reference point to shape Ego's interactions.

The generalized other can best be characterized as the following; a mechanism that mediates the relationship of the self and others by defining the reciprocal relationship between the two, where "others" refers to all other members of the social group as a whole. In a game, the generalized other comes to constitute the rules of that particular game either within a broader context,⁷⁸ or as modified by a particular community.⁷⁹ The generalized other is a mechanism that allows the interrelation of people within specific social groups, while allowing individuals to maintain the coherence of their personalities by characterizing the relationship in terms of "an other," and not the particular individual appealing to the other.

Mead's conceptualization of the generalized other may lay the foundation for us to begin characterizing both the cultural logic and personality systems that are necessary to account for certain actions. However, the generalized other is theoretically diffuse and does not explicitly account for either of these. Mead's characterization of the full self that comes to be realized by "organizing [the] individual attitudes of others into the organized social or group attitudes, and by thus becoming an individual reflection of the general systematic pattern of social or group behavior in which it and the others are all involved"

⁷⁸ For example, the rules of no limit Texas hold 'em, which are usually not reflective of modifications by a specific community, but of a much broader group within which the game is played. The rules of the game will usually be the same across different communities.

⁷⁹ One can think about this in terms of any ball game. A group of children will often create specific rules that cater to their situation. "Past the car is a double, past the parking lot is a homerun, and to the right of the pillar is a foul ball." The generalized other serves, in part, to reinforce the rules of the game within specific social groups.

(Mead 158) is not adequate to explain either individual personality systems, or a cultural logic that filters into the field of reference of an individual when meaning is being constructed in social interactions.

With regard to individual personality systems, these systems are not always reflective of a whole, even within given social groups. Let consider the example of the game of poker. The consideration of the generalized other eventually breaks down as a concept, insofar as the nature of the game is strategic, and the “social attitudes” of opponents do not provide a player with particularly useful information after an initial point. Thus, the generalized other may come to constitute an internalization of “the other players of the game,” insofar as they are attempting to be strategic and profitable. However, knowing the orientation of other players is not particularly useful when attempting to construct meaning within particular interactions. If an opponent makes an all-in bet at a critical moment in a tournament, Ego must decide whether or not to call. Defining individuals in terms of the generalized other, namely by knowing that they are attempting to “win,” is no longer of much use to Ego, since he will know from a very early stage in the process of learning poker that opponents are attempting to beat him at the game. Being successful at the poker table requires that each opponent’s personality system be conceptualized as an autonomous system, and these systems are not reducible to the aggregate of the role sets in which a player interacts (Mead’s generalized other).

Thus, while the process of internalization Mead tries to characterize through his articulation of the generalized other may be helpful insofar as it allows us to in part conceptualize how Ego will react to conduct at a poker table, the substance in the characterization of the “generalized other” is not particularly helpful as a constituent of

meaning after a preliminary stage.⁸⁰ We can now briefly and abstractly characterize the stages of meaning in a new light, incorporating the generalized other into the process.

Ego begins playing/ learning about poker → Ego discovers that the goal of most players is to win money → As a result, Ego realizes that the attitudes of other players orient them in a way adverse to Ego's goal of being profitable → Ego understands that his opponents are acting strategically.

After this process, the understanding of his opponents' orientation no longer provides Ego with particularly useful information. Synthesizing the orientations of others into one unit that will come to constitute the generalized other within the game of poker serves an initial purpose but then ceases to be of much use once it is internalized. Mead's theory must be taken a step further. Conduct cannot simply be made tangible with reference to the situation and a conceptualization of the generalized other that helps to mediate the reciprocal relationship. The conceptualization works on a broader level, but needs to be narrowed down to account for specific actions in given social situations, and Mead cannot do this within the parameters of his theory. As a result, the claim I have made in the previous section of this paper is a fair one; Mead's theory must be altered to incorporate conduct that manipulates a cultural norm, and meaning that is constituted at least in part by an individual personality system.

⁸⁰ The stage at which Ego realizes the goal of the game of poker is to "beat" your opponents...

Third Party Programs

The first resource I will discuss that is available to online players is third party programs. Below is a table that is indicative of a typical data sheet that can be obtained from these programs. This particular table is taken from pokerprophecy.com.

<u><i>Player</i></u>	<u><i>Vanquishall</i></u>
<i>Games played</i>	192
<i>Wins</i>	86 (44.79%)
<i>Losses</i>	106 (55.21%)
<i>Average Buy-In</i>	\$9.55
<i>Players with better winning percentage</i>	200778
<i>Players with worse winning percentage</i>	1080855
<i>\$22 Table:</i>	1 wins / 1 losses / 50% wins
<i>\$20 Table:</i>	4 wins / 4 losses / 50% wins
<i>\$10 Table:</i>	66 wins / 83 losses / 44.3% wins
<i>\$5 Table:</i>	13 wins / 15 losses / 46.43% wins
<i>\$0 Table:</i>	2 wins / 3 losses / 40% wins

To gain insight into an opponent's playing style and ability, a player must first sort out the relevant information available to him in the above table. Eighty percent (or four out of five) of the sit and go tournaments that a player participates in are analyzed, meaning the statistics should be a fairly accurate indicator of a player's results in sit and

go tournaments, assuming that the sample size is large enough. I will now briefly summarize the important information in the table.

Games played- The number of sit and go tournaments a player has entered.

Wins- Number (and percentage) of sit and go tournaments where a player finishes in “the money.” This term refers to all places in which a player receives a payout. For example, in a typical ten person \$10 buy-in sit and go tournament, a player will receive money for finishing 1st, 2nd, and 3rd, where the places pay \$50, \$30, and \$20 respectively.

Average Buy-In- An average of the buy-ins of all analyzed sit and go tournaments. This number is usually a good indicator of the stakes at which a player is comfortable buying in.

Players With better/worst winning percentage- Meant to be used as a tool to rank players within a larger context, this section references the number of players with better and worst percentages of finishing in the money in sit and go tournaments (relative to the player who is being analyzed).

Winning Percentage; Breakdown by Stake- These sections demonstrate how profitable a player is in sit and go tournaments of a particular stake. Each dollar amount represents the buy-in to a particular level stake of sit and go tournaments.⁸¹

⁸¹ Note that \$0 refers to a free roll; a tournament in which no entry fee was required. Free rolls are usually offered as promotional features for new players or high rollers, but are also sometimes

In the above table there is a bundle of information to dissect and analyze. Aside from interpreting the raw data, the considerations a player has to make are numerous; for example, performance at a low stake does not necessarily translate to the same type of performance at a higher stake where players are typically more experienced and make better decisions. Thus, if a player sees an opponent participating in a stake in which he does not have much experience, he should look to take advantage of an opponent's possible discomfort at that level.

The above data is comprised of my first half-year or so of playing on Party Poker's online poker site. My average buy-in is approximately ten dollars over this time span. Ten dollars is the second lowest sit and go buy-in amount available for all game types⁸² on party poker. This would suggest that I was a relatively inexperienced player, or would not be comfortable playing at higher stakes. However, at the levels in which I played I fared well, as is evidenced by the "better" and "worse" players sections and the percentage of times I placed in the money. The sample size is more than large enough to suggest that the high winning percentage is not an anomaly but an indication of a good player at the low stakes levels. Thus, opponents who had access to this data while participating in a low stakes sit and go or multi-table tournament⁸³ against me, should have made note of the fact that I was probably quite comfortable participating in these tournaments. This would in turn affect what strategies an informed opponent would try to

offered to people who qualify through different tournaments that may or may not require a buy-in.

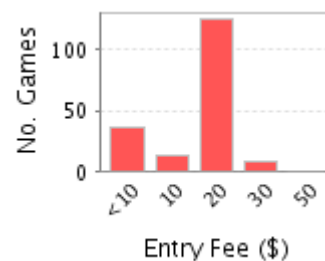
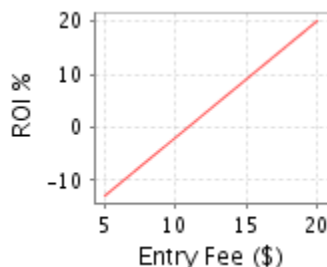
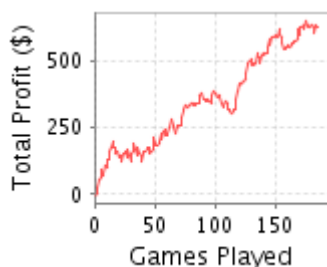
⁸² All fixed betting or no limit cash games and sit and go tournaments. However, this statement excludes multi-table tournaments.

⁸³ Success in sit and go tournaments, more often than not, translates (at least to some extent) to success in multi-table tournaments.

execute against me. Actions like bluffing and trapping typically work better against inexperienced or uncomfortable players, and as a result an opponent may have tried to avoid getting involved in large pots with relatively weak hands against me.

Now let us take a look at another table and several graphs, both obtained from sharkscope.com.

Username	Games Played	Av. Profit	Av. Stake	Av. ROI	Total Profit	Form	Network	Filter
loser13z	184	\$3	\$17	11%	\$621	-	Pacific	x



The table data reflects a sample-set of sit and go tournament results for a different online poker site, pacific poker. The graphs represent various data, including my profit margin over time in the set of analyzed tournaments. A player can cross-reference data and graphs from numerous sites in order to gather more reliable information, and to uncover new trends that may not have been visible from just viewing one of the sites. Different charts indicate different features of an opponent's game, and point out different

tendencies that may be of interest to a player. For example, the graphs shown above give more specific information about the stakes in which a player has played than the initial table I introduced. In addition, these graphs reflect time-specific information about how a player fairs, and this can be very useful. For example, if a player appears to be rather inexperienced and unsuccessful through looking at the pokerprophecy.com data, the sharkscope.com data may indicate that a player has improved his play recently and that consequently, some of the trends reflected in the data (which considers all sit and go tournaments for a particular user name, including ones from well in the past) may no longer be a good indication of a player's skill level. Knowing how your opponent fairs at a particular stake over time can be critical in determining how to play against them. This is because there is a correlation between player-types, strategies, and the one of these players has at a table.

Ego sees two opponents participating in his \$10 sit and go tournament; they are both very aggressive. One of them has a very high winning percentage, and the other a very low one. Ego can now make assumptions about these players, and these assumptions can be altered or confirmed by paying attention to opponents in a game. Ego can and should assume⁸⁴ certain tendencies in these aggressive players. An aggressive player who is successful over the long-run knows the right moments to be aggressive, when to fold his hand, etc. Conversely, an unsuccessful aggressive player probably raises too many pots, overplays his hands, etc.

Let us consider a situation where Ego's opponent, Alter, raises a pot pretty early in a sit and go tournament. The blinds are quite low, and neither Ego nor Alter is short-

⁸⁴ Assuming a large enough sample size in the data, seeing how the player has fared lately by using the time-sensitive data can reinforce that they are a successful/unsuccessful player, etc.

stacked.⁸⁵ In addition, Ego has noticed that Alter is a very aggressive player. Ego has pocket jacks, and is next to act, he reraises Alter. Alter thinks for a while, and goes all in. Whether or not Alter is a successful or unsuccessful tournament player can provide Ego with the means to avoid being eliminated from the tournament, or to double his chip-stack depending on the situation and what the data indicates to him about Alter. Ego sees that Alter is a successful player; he presumably knows when to get his money into the pot, and when to fold. As a result, Ego chooses to fold his jacks even though the fourth best starting hand in poker. Alter shows K-K after Ego had mucked his cards.

Conversely if Ego observed that Alter was an unsuccessful player, he may have made a call (based on that fact) that ended up putting him in a great position in the tournament. While the data may not lead Ego to make the correct decision every time, it will help him make more correct decisions than he otherwise would have over an extended period of time, and this is what is of key importance in poker strategy which once again, is meant to be successful *in the long run*. This situation was one example of how third party programs can aid an online poker player in analyzing his opponents and interpreting the meaning of their actions in an informed manner. Keep in mind the information available to you on third party programs as you continue to read this paper, because this information can combine with other observables that I will discuss to help construct the meaning of specific actions in an even more informed way.

⁸⁵ Low on chips... In tournaments, short-stacked players will often need to push all-in to try and double their amount of chips (in situations where they otherwise wouldn't) in order to avoid "blinding out" of the tournament.

Specific Online Poker Features

Every online poker site has a different look to the game (in terms of aesthetics), as well as different online game-play features. Many of these features are common insofar as they can be found on almost all online poker sites. These “common features” can be valuable to us because they can be used in the poker strategy we are attempting to articulate by helping players make informed decisions about actions opponents are performing. Some of these features include access to limited statistics, check-boxes, multi-table gaming, and other features that I will explain in some detail. The fact that these features are found across a spectrum of sites means that understanding them is crucial to becoming a successful online player, since any site you play on will incorporate them into its game-play in some form or another.

Chat Boxes- For the time being, players are not able to hear each other while playing poker in cyberspace, but that does not mean that communication between players is impossible. In fact, “chatting” through a provided chat box is frequent in online poker games, and a chat box can be found on every online poker site. A chat box is a space within which people can view messages that have been sent back and forth. Players can type their message into a smaller box, usually found at the bottom of the chat box, and then hit the “send” button to send their particular message for everyone else to view. The message will then show up in the main part of the chat box preceded by the user name of the person who sent it, and usually as part of a conversation with other players. In the diagram below, Ego and Alter are participating in a conversation. The text in the box at the bottom of the screen is only visible to Ego until he hits the “send” button, at which point the text will be transferred out of the text box and be made visible to his opponents.

Alter: Nh⁸⁶

Ego: Thanks, scared you had kings.

Alter: Nah, almost made you fold though. Good call.

Ego: Thanks

Ego: You are welcome	SEND
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Opponents discuss everything from particular poker hands to poker strategy and their personal backgrounds in the chat box, and intelligent players can often take advantage of the chat feature to gain information about them.

⁸⁶ A very common notation in poker, standing for “nice hand...”

I briefly mentioned the terminology “tilt” in several instances earlier in this paper; first standing on its own, and then as a part of the discussion of meaning. “Tilt” refers to someone who for some reason is playing particularly (and uncharacteristically) aggressively in an unintelligent manner. The reason for a player “tilting” is almost always losing a big hand. Bad beats are particularly likely to make a player go on tilt, because players often feel like they have been cheated out of money (by getting “unlucky”), which often provokes anger or frustration. A player can use knowledge of his opponent tilting to make a better decision about a particular hand. Typically, a player who is on “tilt” will play a larger amount of hands, and be more likely to get his money into the pot with a hand that is a mathematical underdog.

If a player at a table sees an opponent lose a big hand, particularly by virtue of taking a bad beat, they should be on the lookout for him tilting and look to take advantage. The first step in taking advantage of the situation is determining whether or not an opponent is on tilt,⁸⁷ and the chat box is one way that this determination can be made. The use of abusive language directed at an opponent immediately after losing a hand, often indicates that a player has lost control of his emotions at the poker table. In

⁸⁷ I realize that raising this example is problematic, provided that an opponent may only be “pretending” to be on tilt. The differentiation between someone pretending to be on tilt and actually being on tilt would be a difficult one to make in an online poker room. However, I will offer my opinion that very few people, especially at relatively low stakes of poker (\$5, \$10, \$25, and \$50 maximum buy-in tables), attempt to execute a strategy that is so complex. In addition, few players are willing to lose money to execute a strategy that they feel will make them money in the future (such as was the case in the example where Ego was pretending to be on tilt). That being said, there may be indicators that allow a player to determine whether or not his opponent is really on tilt as opposed to simply pretending to be. I would hypothesize that the best way to make this determination would be to observe your opponent’s style of play. Is an opponent raising lots of pots and then folding when he feels he is behind in the hand? In other words, is he playing aggressively but with discretion that a player who is really “on tilt” would usually not exhibit?

addition, a player who has not been chatting may all of a sudden start chatting about why his opponent made a stupid play in the hand before, how unlucky he got, etc.

Ego: Are you f***ing kidding me, you went all in preflop with 77!!!!

Alter: I won, didn't I?

Ego: I had AA you f***ing moron, do you know how lucky you got?

Alter: Yup, sorry.

Ego: I can't wait to take your money, you stupid fish⁸⁸. You are so damn bad, I bet you lose all the f***ing time.

Let us move to a specific example. In addition to observing the chat between Ego and Alter, Player *x* notices that in the five hands occurring immediately after the discussion, Ego has raised or reraised every hand before the flop. Player *x* is now quite certain that Ego is on tilt, and the point of interest becomes how to take advantage of this fact. Player *x* should be cognizant of several things that may work to his advantage. "Trapping" and "slowplaying," terms referring to playing a very strong hand in a weak manner in order to induce an opponent to bet or raise, are much more likely to work against an opponent who is on tilt, since his actions tend to be much more volatile. Player *x* may choose to wait until he has a very strong hand, and then attempt to trap Ego into losing a big pot. Also, player *x* may be more willing to call Ego's preflop raises with hands he may not have called with prior to Ego going on tilt, for several reasons. If player *x* hits a big flop,⁸⁹ player *x* is more likely to receive a large payout from Ego.⁹⁰ In

⁸⁸ Fish is a term used to refer to an inexperienced or poor player.

⁸⁹ Makes a very strong hand on the flop...

addition, there is a good chance that player x 's starting hand was the better hand to begin with (since Ego is raising a lot of pots). If this is in fact the case, he will not necessarily need to catch a third 8 to win the hand.

The chat feature can also be used to gain valuable information about an opponent outside the context of tilting. An opponent's background information can be useful in determining whether or not he is an experienced player. Often opponents will make statements to the effect of "Yeah I just started playing poker last week; this online thing is pretty cool, I had never played poker before" within a stream of casual conversation. Players should then pay particular attention to these opponents to see if their style of play is more suspect than the average opponent.

Let us now shift our attention to another way in which the chat feature can provide useful information to a player. I will focus on the chatty player, the player who chats all the time during just about every hand, about how bad other players are, about his girlfriend, about how cold it is where he lives, or about anything in general; he always finds something to discuss. All of a sudden, this player makes a big preflop raise and gets very quiet. This is almost always an indicator that the player has a strong hand. (Poker-strategy.org, 2007) The reasons for this sudden change are probably quite complex; I would speculate that first and foremost, having a very strong preflop hand is a very exciting prospect to most players, and people tend to become nervous and focus in these

⁹⁰ This touches upon the notion of "pot odds." If player x calls a \$3 preflop bet with 8-8, knowing that he will only call Ego's large bet (that is sure to come after the flop since Ego is on tilt and betting large amounts all the time) if he hits a set; he knows that he has about a 7:1 chance of catching a third 8 on the flop. If he assumes he will make a lot of money in the hand every one out of eight times he hits a set, then it makes sense to call the preflop raise of only \$3. From a purely mathematical point of view, to justify calling a \$3 bet assuming a one out of eight chance of winning the hand (if Ego felt that he would not call any bet after the flop if he did not catch a third 8), Ego should expect to make \$24 or more when he does flop a third 8.

situations. In addition, players want to be particularly sure they don't misplay hands by running out of time,⁹¹ pressing the wrong action button/ checking the wrong action box, etc. Either way, the tendency to suddenly become quiet is a noticeable trend among chatty online poker players and can help a player make informed decisions about his opponents. Let us look at another example that may help to illuminate this type of situation.

Alter, who is very chatty, loose, and aggressive, makes it three dollars to go at a \$.25/\$.50 no limit table.⁹² This is about the same preflop raise Alter has been making throughout the game, give or take 50 cents. Ego calls with Q-Q, and notices that all of a sudden Alter isn't chatting anymore. The two players head to the flop, which comes 2, 4, 7. Alter, who is first to act, checks, and Ego bets out \$6.75, a standard pot-sized bet. Alter quickly raises to \$15. Ego may normally make this call against an aggressive player like Alter, who has been raising a lot throughout the whole session. However, beside the other indicators that Alter has a strong hand such as the check-raise combination, which usually

⁹¹Players will have a certain amount of time to act before their cards are automatically folded by the site. If you have already paid the necessary amount of money required to enter the hand, the site may check your option (if nobody has bet before you), or treat you as all-in if someone has bet, meaning you can win no more money than is already in the pot at this point. Players will typically only be treated as all-in once or twice in these types of situations, to discourage them from disconnecting every time they are on a draw and do not want to pay any more money to continue in the hand.

⁹² This type of notation is common throughout the poker world. The first two numbers, in this instance .25/.50 refer to the dollar amounts of the small and big blinds respectively, and the no limit following indicates that it is a no limit game table. Sometimes the initial blind numbers will be followed by a maximum amount: for example, \$.25/\$.50 (50 Max) would indicate a no limit game where the maximum buy-in is \$50. The maximum buy-in is a way of insuring that players with less money are not at a huge disadvantage, since other players with very large amounts of money (larger than the maximum allowed buy-in) at the table would otherwise be able to absorb their bets without losing a significant percentage of their chip-stacks. In addition, a max buy-in indicator implies that the game is a no limit game, since not limiting the buy-in in a fixed limit game would provide not provide any particular player with an advantage, regardless of the amount of money in front of them.

implies strength, Ego notices that Alter is quiet for the first time all game. (Hilger, 2007) Ego folds, and Alter who is always willing to show off his good cards shows A-A.

In this instance, the chat feature may have helped save Ego a lot of money, insofar as it (in combination with other observables such as Alter's preflop raise, and check-raise) indicated to Ego that Alter had a very strong hand. (Hilger, 2007) While relying on the chat feature alone is not always affective, Ego used it to help piece together the situation and make a decision about what he thought Alter had. This is the essence of how an observable online feature, such as chatting can be helpful to a player. That is to say, by paying attention to the information and using it as one of the constituents of how meaning is interpreted following another player's initial action.

Check-Boxes- The term I have coined for a series of boxes, usually at the bottom of the virtual poker table, that allow you to predetermine your course of action before it is your turn to act. Depending on the particular situation in the game, the boxes will almost always include the options check, fold, call, call/any, raise, and raise/any.⁹³ These boxes seem like they are simply intended to speed up the game and this may very well be the case from the perspective of those who designed the site. However, the way that check-boxes are utilized by an opponent throughout the course of a hand can allow a player to gain valuable information about whether an opponent is weak or strong when you are involved in a hand against them. (Poker-strategy.org, 2007)

Let us first take the example where a player who is fourth to act,⁹⁴ Ego, calls the big blind with 78 suited. Everyone else in the hand folds until it is the small blind's turn to act. The small blind makes the call (for half the price, since he was in the small blind) and the big blind instantly⁹⁵ checks his option, indicating that he had the "check" check-box selected. The first three communal cards come 9, K, A; the small blind thinks a bit and checks, and the big blind once again checks instantly. To reiterate, the way in which the big blind checked, immediately following the small blind without any delay, makes it obvious that he selected the "check" check-box before it was his turn to act.

⁹³ The term "any" is important to understand... While the raise option means you will double the bet as it stands (when the box is selected) when your turn arrives, the raise/any option means that you will double the bet regardless of what amount it is when your turn arrives. For example, if I am in position six, and the bet currently stands at \$20, highlighting the "raise" check-box indicates that I will raise to \$40 if the bet is still \$20 when my turn arrives. If the bet is raised before my turn (from \$20 to any other amount), the site will automatically unselect the "raise" check-box, and I will have to choose another option. However, by checking the raise/any box, a player indicates that he will double the bet no matter what it is when his turn arrives. This same terminology applies for call and call/any.

⁹⁴ The fourth player to bet during the initial betting round...

⁹⁵ This is of interest because in situations where a check-box is not selected, the time it takes for a player to select his action is noticeable. When a player acts with no time in between this action and the action of the player who acted before him, this indicates that one of the "check-boxes" was selected.

In this particular situation there is very little money in the pot. Ego was the only person to actually call the full price of the big blind, and can decide to bet out⁹⁶ for several reasons. One, the small blind checked pretty quickly, and didn't raise preflop (indicating that he probably didn't have a very strong starting hand). In addition, the fact that the player in the small blind only called half the price of the big blind tells Ego that the call doesn't necessarily reflect that he has a strong hand (which would be more likely to benefit from a flop of 9, K, A then a weaker hand would). Secondly, the big blind used the "check" check-box in a small pot,⁹⁷ where players are usually not invested enough in the hand either financially or emotionally to try and execute a complex strategy.⁹⁸ (Hilger, 2007) In addition, if this turns out not to be the case and one of the blinds raises Ego's bet, Ego can always fold with a minimal loss.

A bet here by Ego representing a strong hand will usually take down the pot right away, especially considering the texture of the flop (neither of his opponents are particularly likely to have an ace or a king for the reasons we mentioned earlier). Even if the small or big blinds have made a pair of kings, or have a small pair (they paired the 9 on the board or have a small pocket pair), within the framework we articulated earlier, both the small and big blind players are likely to interpret Ego's bet as indicating to them that Ego has a stronger hand than theirs. In this situation, Ego can use the actions of the small-blind in combination with the fact that the big blind used one of the check-boxes, to help him easily take down a small pot worth a couple of dollars on a no limit hold 'em

⁹⁶ Poker terminology for making a bet...

⁹⁷ This is significant because since there is not a lot of money at a stake, players will often be less invested in winning the hand, and will simply want to move on to the next hand where they may be involved in a more exciting series of events, where a lot of money is at stake.

⁹⁸ In other words, the instant check is less likely to be deceptive, and more likely to indicate how a "check" is traditionally conceptualized, specifically that the big blind has a weak hand. (Hilger, 2007)

table, regardless of whether or not the flop has actually helped his hand. If Ego can consistently take down these types of small pots, he stands to increase his profits by a significant margin over an extended period of time.⁹⁹ (Hilger, 2007)

Now let us look at a different situation involving a relatively large amount of money. The player in first position, player 1 calls, only to be raised by the player in second position, player 2. Player 2 makes it ten dollars to go at a \$.50/\$1 (\$100 max) table, a large raise. Player 3 calls with A-K, and action folds around back to player 1 who has 8-8 and also makes the call hoping to flop a set (a third 8, which would give him a very strong hand). The three players head to the flop, which comes A, 5, 6; the latter two cards are suited in diamonds. Player 1 thinks for a long time and checks, this is not the type of flop he was hoping for, since no 8 was dealt and an ace came out on the board. Player 1 understands that one of his two opponents is likely to have an ace or at least a higher pocket pair given the preflop raising; meaning he is behind in the hand. Next to act is player 2, who checks instantly (following player 1's check). Player 3 bets \$30 (the size of the pot) with his A-K hoping to chase out anyone with a flush draw,¹⁰⁰ thinking that his top pair top kicker¹⁰¹ is the best hand at the moment. Player 1 thinks for a moment

⁹⁹ Or in a sit and go or multi table tournament, collect chips to help him advance further in the tournament... This will have the same result of increasing profits over time.

¹⁰⁰ In this instance, anyone with a flush draw (who had two diamonds in his hand preflop) would be mathematically inclined to call a smaller bet, hoping to catch another diamond and make a flush. Someone in this example could have a hand like 7-8 or 6-8 of diamonds, good drawing hands which many people would call preflop raises with and that may very well fall within the expected range of hands for Players 1 and 2 (as conceptualized player 3), *r*.

¹⁰¹ The term "kicker" refers to a tie-breaking card of sorts. If a player pairs only of his hole cards, his other card becomes the "kicker." What kicker a player has is important to consider while playing Texas hold 'em. For example, if a flop comes A, 2, 7 and player 1 has A-Q while player 2 has A-K, player two has him "outkicked" since his kicker, a king, beats player one's kicker, a queen. This example demonstrates why having a good kicker is very important in Texas hold 'em. In a hand that is raised preflop, several players will often possess an ace (since they are calling an additional amount of money before the flop, and many strong starting hands with which a player would call a preflop raise contain an ace). Flopping an ace with a better kicker

and then folds, figuring correctly that at least one of his opponents (if not both) is ahead of him in the hand, and knowing that the odds of catching another 8 or running¹⁰² cards to make a straight are very low. Player 2 thinks for a while, and reraises all in with his remaining \$90 (a raise of \$60). Player 3 thanks for a bit and calls, only to have player 2 show the ace of diamonds and the ace of spades, pocket aces. Player 3 is drawing dead; he cannot win the hand regardless of what cards come on the turn and the river.

This was a very good flop for ace king, and when constructing his range, *r*, Player 3 feels that the only hands he had to worry about when calling an all-in were 55, 66, or AA, since it is very unlikely¹⁰³ that Player 1 would have called such a large raise or that Player 2 would have raised such a large amount before the flop with a hand like A7 or A6. So how could Player 3 have saved himself from losing this hand? In this example, it might have served him well to pay attention to the way Player 2 made use of the check-boxes.

While in the first example, the instant check was a sign of weakness, in this example, it becomes evident that Player 2 used the “check” check-box to feign weakness when he was actually very strong; in fact, he had flopped the best possible hand, also known as “the nuts.” When Player 2 checked instantly, only to come back over the top¹⁰⁴ of Player 3, it should have concerned him for reasons that I will illuminate shortly. While

than an opponent gives a player a very large mathematical advantage over him going into the turn and river cards. If player 1 is not careful in the situation I just described (with AQ), he can end up losing a lot of money.

¹⁰² Refers to the cards that are dealt on the turn and the river...

¹⁰³ Remember the idea of “reasonable expectations” of what an opponent can hold. This expectation changes when someone calls a preflop raise of ten times the big blind, a very large raise.

¹⁰⁴ To “come over the top” is a terminology used frequently in poker, and means to reraise.

A-K was a very strong hand in the given situation, Player 3 would have folded if he realized what Player 2 was initially doing, feigning weakness.

Grounding this discussion within the framework we have established, Player 2's "instant check" is the initial action of interest. Player 3 reacts based on several criteria in the situation; the situation within the game, observable information about Player 2's personality, the specific action Player 2 just performed, and the strength of his own hand. As far as the instant check of Player 2 is concerned, it indicated to Player 3 that Player 2 had a weak hand and that his hand was best. In other words, it indicated to Player 3 that Player 2 would either call his bet with a weaker hand, or fold his cards all together after he responded to the instant check with a \$30 bet. In retrospect, Player 3 has clearly made a misread, but he had a chance to correct his mistake and minimize his losses. Player 2's resultant gesture (the all-in raise of \$60 more dollars) can be interpreted as a second initial gesture. For the purposes of clarity, I will ignore player 1's actions (since he folds), and focus on the main interaction of sociological interest here, the interaction between player 2 and player 3.

Player 2 Instantly Checks¹⁰⁵ → Player 3 Bets \$30 → Player 2 Goes All in for \$90
(a \$60 raise)

Above is a linear account of the actions leading up to the time when player 3 must decide whether to call the large raise (putting him all in), or to fold his cards. Meaning is constituted by how Player 2's initial action, the instant check, combined with the

¹⁰⁵ After Player 1, the player with pocket eights has checked...

situation in the game¹⁰⁶ and observable information, indicates how Player 2 will respond to Player 3's reciprocal gesture. Player 2's \$90 bet is the resultant of the situation within this conceptualization of the process. However, within a different conceptualization, this same action is also an initial gesture insofar as Player 3 must once again respond; the system of meaning begins anew. Meaning can now be reconstituted; whereas Player 3 had initially thought that the instant check was a sign of weakness, the all-in raise from Player 2 may cause him to reinterpret what this initial action meant, as well as forcing him to consider what the more recent all-in action means. We can now conceptualize the entire interaction in the following way.

Player 2 Checks Instantly¹⁰⁷ → Player 3 Bets \$30 → **Player 2 Goes all in for \$90 (\$60 raise)** → Player 3 Calls → Player 2 shows the winning cards (player 3 loses the hand).

The action in bold was originally the resultant gesture, but becomes the “new initial gesture” when the system of meaning is reconstituted. This action indicates something to Player 3 about how he should react for the second time in this process, but also allows him to reconsider what Player 2's initial action (the instant check) means. In light of the “all-in,” Player 3 can decide that his initial interpretation of what Player 2's check indicated to him was wrong, and can fold his cards after the all-in raise. There is now a relationship between Player 2's instant check (the initial action of the sequence) and the all-in raise to consider, where Player 3's new conceptualization of the instant

¹⁰⁶ Here, we can assume that Player 2's personality had no influence on Player 3's response to his action for the purposes of focusing on observable information in the form of check-boxes.

¹⁰⁷ After Player 1, the Player who has pocket eights checks...

check may cause him to realize that he was being trapped, and should now fold his cards to minimize his losses.

This example is of interest to us for two reasons. Firstly, we are presenting a new way to interpret the resultant gesture of an interaction, in light of new information that becomes available when an opponent performs a second action (or in our previous conceptualization, a resultant gesture). Secondly, the example is useful insofar as it enables us to understand how the check-box could have helped illuminate what Player 2's initial action and "second initial action (the all-in raise)" meant, and thus how check-boxes can be used strategically in more general terms. (Poker-strategy.org, 2007)

Multi-Table Gaming- One of the ways in which the online medium has revolutionized the way the game of poker is played is through multi-table gaming. The term “multi-table gaming” refers to the option a player has of sitting down at more than one table at a time. On almost any given poker site, a player will be able to sit down at three tables or more simultaneously. This feature allows players who may feel bored playing in only one cash game or tournament to partake in multiple games at once.

The reason that multi-table gaming is of interest to the poker player with regard to formulating a strategy has to do with a very straight forward concept; the more games an opponent is participating in at any given time, the more his concentration must be split amongst the tables, and the less he can pay attention to any one particular game. A player can use the knowledge that an opponent is participating in more than one game to gain an advantage when playing a hand against him.

The first step of this process entails the discovery that an opponent is playing at more than one table. This discovery can be made in several ways, either intentionally or coincidentally. Most online poker sites offer a “search” option that will allow a player to search for a particular user (by username). While a user will usually have the option of “blocking” the search, meaning that he may hide himself from appearing in any results of searches of his name, most players do not exercise this option. The search will usually tell a player how many tables a user is sitting at, the names of these tables, and the stakes at which the user is playing.

Another method by which a player can discover his opponent is playing at multiple tables is by simply opening more than one table and seeing him in more than one seat; this will often be a coincidental discovery that occurs when a player participating in

one game decides either to search for an alternative or to join additional games. Keep in mind that just because Ego is playing in more than one game at once, doesn't mean that knowing his opponent is doing the same is not useful information to him.

Regardless of the method of discovery, knowledge that an opponent is participating in multiple games can come in very handy. Opponents participating in more than one game are less likely to notice tendencies of particular players, and are more likely to act based solely on the situation in the game, and the specific action that is being performed within that context. In certain situations, these players can be bluffed, trapped, and manipulated more easily than they would have been while participating in only one game. I will provide one example to illuminate this fact.

Let us consider the situation where Ego makes a large bluff against an opponent, Player 2, at a table. Ego then executes another bluff for the same amount in a similar situation against player 3, a different opponent at the same table. He shows his bluff both times, hoping to use this to his advantage later on when he has a strong hand (in hopes that he will be able to convey that he is bluffing when this situation arises, and get paid off). The downside of this strategy is that Ego may not be able to bluff successfully in the near future should the opportunity arise, as other players are now cognizant of the fact he has already bluffed twice in a relatively short period of time. Ego sees that one of his opponents, Alter, is sitting down at the table he is playing on and another table which he is about to leave, he then performs a search and sees that Alter is also sitting at two other tables (he is participating in four games at once). He creates a note on Alter: "multi-gamer; search when you see him at the table" for future reference.

Shortly after executing the two bluffs, Ego is dealt 6-7 suited in clubs and calls Alter's raise of three times the big blind. In addition, Ego is aware that this is the exact raise that Alter made in a previous hand when he knocked an opponent out of the tournament with A-K suited. The flop comes 2, 4, 10, with two clubs. Alter, who is first to act makes a pot-sized bet,¹⁰⁸ Ego calls on the flush draw. The turn brings a 9 of diamonds, and Alter makes another substantial bet. Ego calls yet again, and the river bring a queen of hearts. Alter checks after the river card, and Ego interprets this as a sign of weakness.¹⁰⁹ Ego is in a prime situation within the game to make a bluff. Based on a hand Ego observed previously, it seems as if Alter may be stuck with ace high, making it very difficult for him to call any substantial bet since even a low pair beats him. However, Ego is concerned about the fact that he has just bluffed twice. Ego knows that the odds of him winning the hand (with seven high) without forcing Alter to fold are slim to none, and that he already has a lot of money invested in the pot. Suddenly, Ego remembers that Alter is playing at four tables. Ego makes a pot-sized bet and Alter folds immediately.

When playing four tables at once, a player (in this example, Alter) is forced to constantly rotate between the different tables as hands are dealt in each different game and his turn to act comes up. This inhibits his ability to pay attention to one set of players (and their actions) in particular, and subsequently to collect detailed information about particular players. Within the framework I articulated previously, this will have an effect on how Alter interprets the meaning of his opponents' actions. Given a higher likelihood of not having information about the particular tendencies of his opponents, a player in

¹⁰⁸ A bet the size of the pot, in effect doubling the size of the pot...

¹⁰⁹ Within the conceptualization grounded in our previous framework, Ego interprets this bet as signaling to him that Alter will fold if Ego bluffs at the pot.

Alter's position will typically not utilize the personality systems of his opponents, and will interpret their actions based solely on the situation in the game and the actions themselves. Alter may very well have sensed that Ego's bet was suspicious even without knowledge of his tendencies. However, the difference between calling with ace high and folding could very well have been the fact that he did not witness Ego's two previous bluffs. Ego took advantage of the situation to execute a play that paid off for him.

The deprivation of information is the key attribute of multi-table gaming that I wanted to illuminate in this paper, because it changes how meaning is constructed in certain scenarios. The smart poker player can use this information to manipulate how his opponents interpret his actions, helping him to make more money over the long run.

Notes- Keeping notes on opponents, when practical, can be very useful to the online poker player. The “practicality” aspect of note-taking refers to several things; do you play frequently with these players (if not, having notes on a player will only be useful while he/she is at your table for one particular session), does a player reveal something about him or herself that would allow a note to be useful to you, and do you have a way to take down notes at the poker table? Within the online realm, the answer to all of these questions is usually yes.

Within a certain stake,¹¹⁰ and often at levels directly below or above this stake, it is like that there is a contingent of players that frequents tables. While some people a player sees at a \$.25/\$.50 (\$50 max) no limit hold ‘em table may not play regularly, he can be assured that he will bump into a lot of these players again in the future. In addition, he may see these same players at \$25 max no limit hold ‘em tables and \$100 max no limit hold ‘em tables, the stakes directly below and above the \$50 maximum buy-in tables respectively. Hence, taking notes on players serves not only to document useful information for particular sitting sessions, but also is often useful for future sessions as well. In addition, notes can be added to and/or subtracted from in subsequent sessions, as a player gains more and more information about an opponent the more he plays against him.

As for the second part of the initial question, almost every player reveals something about himself when he plays poker. Notes that reflect these tendencies can be

¹¹⁰ The term “stake” refers to the level of play from a financial perspective. For example, a \$20 + \$2 sit and go tournament is at a different stake than a \$50 +\$5 sit and go tournament. This also applies to cash games, where the “stake” refers to the amounts of the “small” and “big” bets in fixed limit hold ‘em (for example \$1/\$2) and the amount of the blinds and the maximum allowed buy-in at a no limit hold ‘em table (for example, \$1/\$2 \$200 max no limit hold ‘em).

as straight forward as “bets \$8.50 every time he is trying to make a bluff on the river at a \$50 max table,” or more complicated, reflecting strategies within the game; the amount of time a player tends to take in certain situations, the stakes at which the player seems to be successful, etc. Either way, if a player is involved in a hand with an opponent,¹¹¹ he should almost always be able to observe something useful about the opponent’s play, especially as he plays more and more hands with the opponent. Some sites, such as Fulltiltpoker.com will even allow a user to color-coordinate their notes, using different colors to notate different strategies and/or skill levels. Notes can even reflect information picked up in chats. For example, a player revealing that he is a beginner through casual discussion, or demonstrating that he is liable to go on tilt through abusive and profane chats.

Finally, to answer the third part of the question, every online poker site I have seen allows a user to take notes on his opponent. Typically, a user will have to click on the opponent’s user name or avatar¹¹² to begin the process, prompting an option that will allow a user to access a “note box.” A note box is simply a text box, within which users can type in notes about their opponents. After a note is taken on an opponent, some form of marker distinguishing this opponent from all the others will appear. Often times there will be a note pad icon on the opponent’s username, or a capital “N” signifying that you have made a note on that particular user.

¹¹¹ Especially if this hand is played until after the river and what an opponent holds is revealed; this provides information about what actions an opponent has performed with certain cards throughout an entire hand.

¹¹² Many sites allow a player to upload (or select from an assortment of pictures, pre-selected by the site) a picture, or “avatar” that appears next to their username when they sit down at a table. This avatar is then seen by opponents at this player’s table.

An in-depth discussion of the ways in which note-taking is useful is only helpful when a note appeals to a certain tendency of a player, and many of these tendencies have already been discussed in this paper. Thus, I will not proceed to provide in-depth examples of situations in which notes can be useful, but simply reference previous player-types that have been conceptualized in this paper. Useful notes (in terms of their strategic value) should typically provide information about the following; aspects of an opponent's personality system, an opponent's style of play, obvious tells an opponent may have, and specific examples of hands that may help to clarify anything about the player (including his personality, betting patterns, tells, etc.). Thus, a player may in part extrapolate meaning (as constituted by a particular action) from the notes he has on an opponent.

Ego sits down at a \$50 max no limit hold 'em poker table and sees that one of his opponents, "pokerwiz448" has an "N" notation next to his username. Ego does not remember this particular player (he sees hundreds of players each day on the various poker sites on which he plays), and he accesses the note to see what it reveals. Ego's note on pokerwiz448 says;

"Loose, raised almost every pot to 3 X BB,¹¹³ makes continuation bets¹¹⁴ after the flop no matter what. Makes very big bets on the river when he is bluffing, will never give up on a hand if he has invested money on the pot, even when he has nothing."

¹¹³ Refers to a raise of three times whatever the cost of the big blind is at the particular table.

¹¹⁴ A continuation bet refers to a bet after the flop executed by the player who had made a raise preflop. This play is usually executed to continue to represent having a strong hand and to try and win the pot with the continuation bet; even if the preflop raiser has missed the flop (the flop did not help his starting hand).

Soon after, two players, “shark45” and “iownyou66” join Ego’s table, both of whom also have an “N” notation next to their usernames. Ego accesses each note, the first is on shark45;

“Super tight, only raises with premium hands. Can be bluffed out on the river if he shows weakness. I bluffed him when a third club came down on the river, he later told me that he had top pair but was scared of the flush. But watch out, usually a good player who can trap opponents and will slowplay big flops.”

The second note, on iownyou66 reads;

“Easily tilted; both times I saw him lose pots of \$20 or more, he cursed a lot, bought back to \$50 and started raising pots and playing really loose.”

If Ego chooses not to ignore this new information, he now has a tactical advantage over three players at his table. He knows that pokerwiz448 can be trapped into losing a lot of money if Ego is patient and waits for the right situation. He also knows that situations where he would normally fold his cards may be good situations to call or raise pokerwiz448, given the amount of hands that he plays.

In addition, Ego knows that he may be able to play aggressively against shark45 and be successful; to raise pots that shark45 has limped into¹¹⁵ in order to get him to fold and take down small pots, or to bluff shark45 out of some big pots on the river if he shows weakness in the hand. Ego also knows that if he attempts to bluff shark45, only to get

¹¹⁵ Just called the big blind, and did not raise preflop...

reraised, he may have been trapped, and is unlikely to have the best hand since shark45 is such a tight player. Ego should also watch out when shark45 checks “big flops,” like A2A or AAK after raising preflop, because shark45 may be trapping him.

Finally, Ego knows that if iownyou66 loses a big hand, he should be on the lookout for iownyou66 going on tilt, and that he should try to take advantage. In addition, he can even try to provoke iownyou66 through the chat box (for example, by mocking his play when he loses a hand, even if he made the right play and just got unlucky) in order to try and put iownyou66 on tilt. All this information about three of the players on his table can help Ego make a lot of money, or save Ego a lot of money depending on what situations arise during that particular session.

Notes are useful insofar as they provide information in one of the areas we have speculated is critical to constructing meaning at poker tables; the opponent’s action itself, the situation in the game, and the personality of the opponent, including characteristics of the player’s personality system which may only be tangible through an understanding of the “online poker logic” we had previously discussed. A player can draw upon his notes to help illuminate any one of these spheres, and gain a tactical advantage by making more informed decisions that will pay off over the long run.

Site Statistics- Most sites will allow you access to a player's statistics for each particular online session.¹¹⁶ These statistics will almost always include the percentage of flops seen, number of showdowns, the percentage of showdowns won,¹¹⁷ and the percentage of total hands won. Showdown is a term which refers to a situation where a player does not fold throughout the entirety of the hand; in essence, a player plays the hand all the way to the end and remains in the hand through the entire betting round on the river. Percentage of flops seen is of particular interest, because it indicates how often a player is playing his two hole cards and offers valuable insight as to whether an opponent is a tight or loose player. (Poker-Strategy.org, 2007) A larger percentage usually indicates a loose or aggressive player, while a lower percentage usually indicates a tight player.¹¹⁸

The "statistics" option on many online sites is analogous to the "third-party programs" that I discussed earlier. Since the statistics on poker sites are free to access,¹¹⁹ they do not provide information that is as detailed as the information third-party programs provide.¹²⁰ In addition, site statistics never offer information on how opponents perform on other sites, and almost always only provide statistics for the one particular session during which they are accessed. Thus, players must be careful when accessing data for a particular session because over short time-spans, the data may not actually be an accurate representation of how a player typically plays. For example, if the data shows

¹¹⁶ A session refers to the entire length of a one sitting at a particular table. In terms of viewing an opponent's statistics, a session encompasses the amount of time you have been sitting at a table with your opponent, and not the time he may have been at the table prior to you sitting down.

¹¹⁷ A situation where the hand is played out until after the final round of betting; in other words, the player who wins the pot does not win by virtue of all of his opponents folding...

¹¹⁸ These types of players are characterized in more detail earlier in the paper, particularly in the "third party programs" section.

¹¹⁹ Whereas third party programs always charge a fee, sometimes after a brief trial period.

¹²⁰ These programs rely on their detailed information as a selling point to consumers.

that Alter has played 75% of his hole cards over a span of four hands, this data is typically not useful to Ego.

However, for extended sessions, the data serves a similar purpose to third-party programs, although it provides a user with considerably less information. The data allows you to characterize an opponent's playing style, and sometimes even his skill-level. While third-party programs are more accurate in this regard, since they allow you access to information about how much success a player has had over long periods of time (and other statistics unavailable to you in the "statistics" option), statistics for a particular session can still allow you to estimate how successful a player has been for that session. This data can be used in a similar fashion as is seen in the "third party programs" section of this paper, and can allow a player to make assumptions about his opponents that can be useful in myriad situations when interpreting an opponent's action.

Other Observables- While I have discussed many important features of online poker play that can be beneficial to a poker player insofar as they provide him with useful information about his opponents, I have not discussed them all. Other observables such as the time it takes for an opponent to make decisions, betting patterns,¹²¹ and the use of avatars and usernames,¹²² (Hilger, 2007) can be used to discover information about opponents and to either manipulate them or better interpret their actions. Part of the virtue of this paper lies in the fact that the theory articulated can be extended to other variables which I have not discussed, and I hope that you (the reader) can make use of some of the other observable information available to you on online poker sites within the framework I have provided to you in this paper.

¹²¹ Though these have not been discussed, many examples in this paper (such as the ones found on pages 23 and 24) are examples of how betting patterns can be used to either uncover opponents' tells, or to manipulate opponents into performing a particular action.

¹²² For example, on many poker sites my user name is sexylady456 and my avatar is a provocative picture of a lady. I hope that this will either convey that I am an attractive woman, whom the typical poker player will take less seriously in terms of their ability to play poker, or simply get my opponents to question whether or not I actually am a woman. I hope that my avatar and user name will distract my opponents in some regard, and they often do. I receive numerous comments through the chat box that are a reflection of the fact that people pay attention to my username and avatar.

The Strategic Import of Poker Tells

While I hope that my discussion of observables juxtaposed with a discussion of meaning and poker tells was useful in illuminating specific ways which poker tells can be discovered, I also hope that the framework I articulated was useful insofar as it can enable you to think about how meaning is constructed to discover and exploit tells in new ways. While I did not explicitly refer to the “expectations” section that I constructed earlier in this paper, it is important to keep this section in mind when thinking about poker tells as a useful concept. Some poker tells may be so illuminating as to completely reveal an opponent’s position in a certain hand, but most of the time this is not in fact the case. Usually, tells are combined with both the opponent’s action and the situation in the game to provide a player with an educated guess as to what the best response would be; this process is to a large degree based on expectations.

Without having any expectation of what an opponent holds in his hand, narrowing down possibilities becomes very difficult, and a correct decision becomes overly dependant on chance. Ego will be constantly guessing where his opponent is in a hand without having an idea of where to start. Poker tells usually only narrow the range of possibilities so much, so making accurate assumptions about the range of hands an opponent can hold is critical if a player wishes to be successful. This expectation must be adjusted throughout the hand; it is not enough to simply construct an initial range of expectations. When an opponent performs an action, Ego must decide if he has a weaker hand, is on a draw of some kind, or has a very good hand. Observable information can help Ego to on average make a better estimate than his opponents would in similar situations, and this becomes a profitable enterprise over a long period of time. However,

poker tells are not useful if Ego has no understanding of the basics of the game; basic probabilities,¹²³ strong starting hands, basic strategies such as when to raise and fold, etc.

If Ego uses observables to discover that his opponent is probably on a flush draw, but has no idea what the odds are that his opponent will make the flush, this information is of no use to him before the river card is dealt. A player must study the basics of the game before he can be successful, regardless of any observable information available to him in the online poker medium or brick and mortar card rooms.

¹²³ For example the odds of flopping a set, making a flush or straight draw with one or two cards left to be dealt, etc.

Conclusion

This thesis was meant to appeal to people for both its sociological import and its practicality with regard to playing the game of poker. In either case, this paper was constructed to be intelligible to both the sociologist and the poker player. While attempting to conclude with one point would be an oversimplification and thereby a misrepresentation of what I was trying to accomplish, a summary is necessary for any long body of work, so I will do my best to provide one.

My reasons for doing this thesis can best be quickly summarized by the following; this paper enabled me to study online poker, something that interests me greatly, while grounding much of the discussion in sociology, my field of interest. I ultimately conclude that Mead's theory is inadequate to account for the construction of meaning, insofar as it lacks the means to characterize both the personality systems of the actors participating in the interaction, and the cultural logic under which they act. While neither of these elements is *necessarily* important to render meaning intelligible in an interaction, each element is a necessary constituent of a theory that hopes to explain meaning across the entire spectrum of actions, which Mead's theory presumably intends to do (since he mentioned no exceptions to it).

For the sociologist, I hope that this paper allowed you to think about Mead in a different way, and perhaps even to problematize his theory of meaning in a way that you had never done before. Whether or not you agree with my characterization of Mead's theory, and/or the theory of meaning that is constructed when I add the two key elements I feel are not accounted for (namely personality systems and a cultural logic), I hope that this paper allowed you both to think about Mead critically through some of the aspects of

his theory I have illuminated, and to come to your own conclusions about whether both Mead and I am right or wrong. In addition to the parts of the paper that are strictly sociological, the discussion of poker (and the subsequent examples grounded in online poker interactions) can serve as a lens to help you focus Mead's theory, and to highlight what aspects of his theory of meaning you agree and don't agree with.

To the people who are more interested in poker than sociology, you may find some of the sections in this paper interesting and useful, and some impractical and/or unhelpful insofar as enabling you to be more successful playing online poker. While many of the examples are simplified cases of situations that arise in the poker world, this does not mean that the points I am trying to illustrate are any less valuable. In addition, it is important to remember that the construction of situational examples in this paper is often meant to allow me access to critical elements that constitute meaning in Mead's theory, and subsequently lend themselves to the theory I attempted to articulate. While some of the examples are simple, every example illustrated in this paper is to some extent exemplary of a common occurrence in poker, and is by no means trivial. If you wish to complicate these examples when thinking about the issues I raise in this paper, this can be accomplished without altering the framework in which I operated. In other words, the points illustrated in the examples will not become useless or wrong when applied to more complex examples of poker interactions. I hope that analyzing poker situations from a different perspective has enabled you to think about certain scenarios in an interesting and informative fashion. I also hope that the "Poker Tells" section was useful insofar as it provided to you both a way to think about poker tells, and new methods by which you can gain information about your opponents.

Finally, much has changed since I began writing this thesis late last year. Many of the poker sites that were available to citizens of the United States are no longer available as a result of the passing of the “Safe Port Act.” While several reputable online poker sites remain open to residents in the United States, this number is growing smaller on a weekly basis. The theory of meaning I articulate in this paper is grounded in online poker, but it is by no means confined to this medium. My hope is that the theory can be extended to brick and mortar game rooms, and beyond poker itself. While specific sections of this paper do not make sense outside the context of online poker, from a sociological perspective they are merely examples which serve to illustrate points. I believe that the theory I articulate remains valid outside the context of online poker.

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