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The Origin of Poker - pg2

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Problems and questions

One minor problem that no one seems to have noticed is five-suit decks at that time were hand painted and cost more than the lifetime earnings of a sailor. You can mark up a mass-produced four-suit deck, but history tells us people adapt the game to the available decks, not the other way around. If As Nas did spread beyond Persia by 1800, and there's no direct evidence that it did, it almost certainly converted to 20-card poker early in the process. That means poker could have been invented anywhere, at any time. This trail leads nowhere.

Another problem is that As Nas has flushes and betting rounds after each card is dealt. Why would these features be dropped and then reintroduced? This applies to all the other games proposed as poker's ancestor; they contain features present in modern poker that were not part of the early game.

Reflecting on this leads to a blindingly obvious insight. Twenty card poker is too simple to play. All the interesting features of card play have been stripped out. It could be derived from any number of earlier games by throwing out all the choices and calculations. Or any card player could have simply made it up from general card play principles. The question isn't where it came from; the question is why it is so simple?

It is the betting rules that make poker interesting. There is no record of an earlier game with poker betting. Once you have them, you can apply them to almost any method for dealing cards and ranking hands, or even to non-card gambling games. My guess is the betting rules were applied to many games. Since complicated card play is then unnecessary, the games simplified. As players moved from place to place, the rules simplified further to converge on the simplest possible version.

We could get even simpler than twenty card poker using one card hands. There are two problems. First, there are not enough different hands. This means too many ties and not enough interesting situations. Second, cards were lower quality than today, and were used longer. Square corners bent so that every deck became marked. That's fatal in one card showdown, but not as bad with five-card hands. People played with decks after some cards had been lost or discarded due to damage. Again, this makes more difference in a one card than a five card game.

On the other hand, you couldn't make hands too big. The cards were larger than today and harder to read. There were no index numbers; you had to recognize the pip pattern. Face cards had only one head (you couldn't turn it upside down to read it better without giving away that you held a face card). Playing with heavily-used decks under candlelight meant you had to look carefully at your hand, one card at a time. Pictures show players doing this, using two hands and exposing only one card, rather than fanning out cards in one hand. Playing with lots of cards is difficult under these conditions.

Three and four card hand poker games are possible, but have problems. Matched-card hands (like pairs and threes of a kind) are too rare. Straights and flushes are too common. You can come up with acceptable hand rankings, but not simple ones. Five cards are convenient to hold and make good poker using the simplest hand rankings.

Betting

So if we can determine the origin of the betting rules, the card play makes sense and we have documented history that brings us up to the present. Without the betting rules, the card play makes no sense, so tracing that aspect of the game is pointless as well as impossible.

Gold rushes and wars bring together young men of varied backgrounds and subject them to long stretches of boredom interspersed with physical danger. This leads to gambling and therefore attracts professional gamblers. The unprecedented economic boom caused by the introduction of steamships to the Mississippi was no exception.

The gamblers didn't have an easy time. River ports blamed them for limiting economic opportunity by fleecing travelers and causing violence. Lynching of gamblers was common, such as the murder of five cardsharps by vigilantes in Mississippi in 1835. Games moved to



the riverboats. The steamship companies refused passage to troublesome gamblers, those who generated complaints or fights. Cheaters could not easily disappear. On top of these problems, the victims were often well-educated: engineers, mechanics, and business agents rather than cannon fodder or unskilled laborers. Professionals were forced to make the games more honest.

This Mississippi riverboat period saw innovations in traditional games to reduce cheating: the board in faro, reworked rules of craps to make loaded dice less useful, the cage in chuck-a-luck, shoes for blackjack and baccarat, and many others. But the problem was not just cheating. You can't cheat at chess or pool, but you can hustle a sucker by pretending to play badly and then increasing the bet. Games like ace-deuce-jack and three-card monte, even if played honestly, give the dealer an enormous advantage.

Poker cuts through these problems. The game (especially in 20 card form) does not require complicated calculations or any card play decisions. You can learn it by watching for a few dozen hands (playing it well is another matter, but it depends on nerve, common sense and psychology, not years of practice). There is no built-in advantage for any player. Cheating at poker is much harder than at pure luck or cardplay skill games.

There is a simple honesty to poker betting. All players remaining in the hand make equal contributions to the pot. Each decision to put money in the pot is made freely and openly, and in turn. Money is never removed from the pot. No player is excluded from the pot unless he voluntarily folds or is beaten in a showdown. Except for the cards in their hands, all players have the same information at all times. No earlier recorded form of betting has these characteristics. Interestingly, this is the first form of betting that allows true bluffing, in the poker sense.

We can't be sure why this betting first became popular on Mississippi riverboats in the early 1800's. But, it's highly suggestive that poker betting fits naturally with other gambling innovations of the time. Early sources about poker always discuss it relative to other gambling games, not other card games. Another interesting thing to consider is the invention of poker took some clever bookkeeping and financial innovation. At the same place and time, modern futures exchanges were being developed, using precisely the same kind of bookkeeping and finance (and hampered by the same moralists who claimed both were just gambling). Although poker and futures contracts seem simple today, I don't think either one was an old idea that rose to popularity at this time. I think they were conscious inventions of a new breed of literate and honest opportunist.

This story is too speculative to get poker into respectable society, and too tainted by economic activity and professional gamblers. But I think it's a prouder story than anything a millionaire did on his yacht or anything traced back to the middle ages. Poker is not an aristocratic game with old-world roots; it's a brash and energetic product of the new world. Its ancestors were not other card games but the ambition, energy, and courage that made the modern world.

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