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A Brief History of Poker

*I was playing poker with tarot cards the other
night. I got a full house and four people died.*

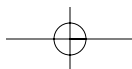
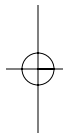
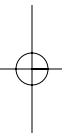
—Steven Wright

The Short Stack

Origins of Card Games

Poker: An American Saga

The Modern Era



The true origins of poker have been lost and blurred in the mists of time, and even the most dedicated scholar of games is left with a lot of guesswork and conjecture. However, the modern game of poker, as we know and love it today, developed primarily on the American frontier of the 19th century. Poker's most recent incarnations—online and on TV—have had the effect of spreading poker across the globe.

This chapter looks at the ancient roots of poker (and card games in general) and then traces the game forward to its weird and wild place in the Information Age of the 21st century.

The Origins of Card Games

The history of the card game almost certainly merges with the history of paper currency, somewhere way, way, way back in the day. It's believed that the ancient Chinese were the first to divvy up cash currency into various denominations, and it's likely that games were played both for and with this paper money. Actual card games emerged in China sometime later. These games were usually very basic—numerical cards in which a higher number “captured” a lower number.

At some point in the development of card games, a more complicated method of play emerged in which certain cards formed winning combinations, as opposed to a strictly numerical system of value. So, for instance, a pair of matching cards (such as two queens) would best a single card of higher rank (a king). This resulted in two basic principles of card games, from which virtually all modern card games can be traced: one, strict numerical designations determine winning hands, and two, combinations of like cards determine winning hands.



Figure 3.1 The First Poker Game?

These early card games were also found in historical India and Persia. The Indian influence on the modern playing card is suggested by the resemblance of the modern suits (diamonds, spades, hearts, and clubs) to the ring, sword, cup, and baton often depicted in the Indian Round Cards in the hands of Hindu statues.



The Mysterious Tarot

In the 13th and 14th century, the roots of today's standard 52-card deck begin to emerge in Europe. The Chinese cards probably arrived in the satchel of the famed Venetian explorer Niccolò Polo. (You may remember his son Marco.) The Persian influence was almost certainly a result of the Moorish conquest of Spain. Another possibility is that Arabian cards were brought over by the gypsies.

In any case, by the 14th century, the *Tarot deck* was established in Italy and France and associated with the gypsies, who used these cards for games and fortune-telling. The Tarot deck was divided into a Major Arcana of 22 cards and a Minor Arcana of 56 cards.



The Minor Arcana looks awfully familiar. The cards are divided into four suits of 14 cards each: wands, batons, or rods (clubs); cups (hearts); swords (spades); and coins, pentacles, or disks (diamonds). Each suit has a value progression of ace to ten, and then “face cards” of page (or jack), knight, queen, and king. Somewhere along the way, the knight card was lost, and our modern playing deck contains 52 cards in four suits.

About the 16th century, this 52-card deck became standard throughout Europe and a million or so card games were invented—including familiar classics such as Whist and Bridge. In fact, the incredible popularity of card games is often cited as a factor in the development of various printing technologies.

Primero, Pochen, and Poque

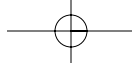
Probably the first *direct* ancestor of modern poker is a 16th century game played in Western Europe called Primera (Spain) or Primero (in England). This three-card game featured some recognizable aspects of the game today. Hands were wagered upon, and value combinations included a pair, three-of-a-kind, and three cards of the same suit (called a “flux”—sound familiar?).

By the 18th century, some of the more psychological aspects of the game had been thoroughly established. Five-card games like Brag (England), Pochen (Germany), and Poque (France, see Figure 3.2) centered around concepts of bluffing and outmaneuvering opponents with deception and aggressive wagering.

Meanwhile, the world was spinning on in its stubborn way, and Europe found itself engaged in another diverting little activity—colonizing the New World. And so card games arrived in the Americas, where the modern game of poker was born.



Figure 3.2 Poque



Etymology Corner!

The origin of the English word “poker” remains unclear, although there is no shortage of suggestions. Below are a few of the possibilities:

Poque Most commonly cited, poque was the name of an 18th century French card game that bore some resemblance to the modern game of poker.

Pochspiel Another early card game—this one German—pochspiel incorporated bluffing and other features now found in poker. Players would indicate checking or passing by rapping their knuckles on the table and saying, “Ich Poche!” (“I pound!”)

Hocus-pocus Stage magic and playing cards have gone hand-in-hand for a long time, so this was bound to pop up. Still, it’s the least likely of the possibilities.

Pukka A Hindu word meaning genuine or first-rate, the word *pukka* became a popular slang term in Europe’s seedier cardrooms.

Poke Another slang term from Europe and the U.S., *poke* was used by pickpockets to mean a bag or satchel, or sometimes to identify a “mark” or possible victim.

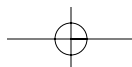
Poker, Riverboats, and Saloons: An American Saga

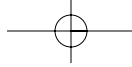
The game of poker, as we know it today, is as American as jazz. Just as that music style fused traditions and influences from the Old World into a distinct new entity, poker drew upon the established card games of Europe and fermented into something altogether different.

Most likely, it was French colonists in Louisiana who brought the game to America. The French game poque is most often cited as the origin of modern poker, and some of the earliest records of the game in America come from New Orleans. A description of the game in 1829 featured a deck of 20 cards, in which four players bet on whose hand of cards was the most valuable.

From there, poker spread north via the Mississippi and then took a hard left, as frontiersmen brought the game from river cities into the untamed West. Jonathan H. Green’s book, *An Exposure of the Arts and Miseries of Gambling* (G. B. Zieber, Philadelphia, 1843), described the spread of the game by Mississippi riverboats (see Figure 3.3), on which gambling was a common pastime.

In his book, Green writes about what he called the “cheating game,” which was played with the standard 52-card deck but using only the aces, kings, queens, jacks, and tens. Green claimed that this game had become popular among hustlers and card-sharps, getting more play than the old standby of *Three-Card Monte*.





As pioneers and players ambled toward the Pacific, the full 52-card deck came into use, and the flush was introduced. During the American Civil War, many distinctly American additions to the game were made, including draw poker, stud poker, and the straight. Further developments followed, such as the *wild card* (circa 1875), lowball and split-pot poker (circa 1900), and community card poker games (circa 1925). Poker also moved in the other direction and found great popularity in Eastern seaboard cities such as New York and Boston. The spread of the game of poker to other countries, particularly in Asia, is often attributed to the American military.

Poker in the Wild West

Much of the romance and down-and-dirty glamour of poker comes from its history as the game of choice in the saloons of the American West. In the mid-to-late 1800s, poker was wildly popular in the lawless frontier towns due to its relative portability. All you needed were a deck of cards and a fistful of dollars.

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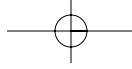
CHAPTER 3: A BRIEF HISTORY OF POKER



Fistful of Dollars is the 1964 spaghetti western starring our man Clint Eastwood.

Tales abound of gunslingers and cowboys hunched over dusty tables, whiskey at hand and spittoon on the floor. This classic image of the Wild West saloon owes as much to film and fiction as it does to actual history. Popular Western dime novels, one of the genres of pulp fiction of the day, brought stories of card cheats and gunmen from the frontier back to the reading public in cities east of the Mississippi.





The classic Western movie often incorporated poker games as simply part of the scenery—as much a part of Wild West life as the high-noon showdown, the crooked sheriff, and the painted ladies of the night. From old movie standards such as *Stagecoach* to modern blockbusters like *Maverick*, Hollywood has made a pocket industry out of selling the romance of the Old West poker game.



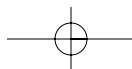
Probably the most enduring story from these days of yore is the tale of the *Dead Man's Hand*. On August 2, 1876, famed gambler and lapsed lawman James Butler “Wild Bill” Hickok rode into the bleak town of Deadwood, deep in the Dakota Territory. As he sat in a game of draw poker at Sweeney’s Silver Dollar Saloon, he was shot in the back and killed by Jack McCall, supposedly the brother of a man that Hickok himself had shot and killed in Abilene, Texas.

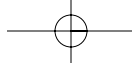
When he was killed, Wild Bill held a pair of eights and a pair of aces, which has ever since been known as the Dead Man’s Hand. To be specific, Bill held black aces and black eights, and his fifth card was said to be the deuce of spades. A grim-looking combination. So if you’re ever dealt that particular set of cards, you may want to check behind you. Just in case.

Wild Bill’s poker playing and untimely demise were recently brought to life in the new HBO series *Deadwood*.



The upshot of all this dusty lore is that poker has long been steeped in the iconography of the American Old West (as evidenced by such cultural artifacts as Wild





West poker chips), with its qualities of rugged individualism, cutthroat competition, and high adventure.



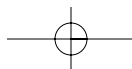
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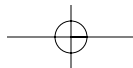
The Modern Era

In the 20th century, poker has matured rather gracefully—and mellowed. Its roughneck image of the past has been gradually supplanted with the advent of family gatherings, friendly home games, and clean, well-lit tournaments, as you can see in Figure 3.4. Today, poker is played by more people than any single other card game in the U.S., with the probable exception of solitaire.



Figure 3.3 Friendly home poker game





Bob Dylan and Wild West Poker

Even folk bard Bob Dylan paid homage to the image of the sepia-toned Wild West poker game in his classic song "Lily, Rosemary and the Jack of Hearts."

*Backstage the girls were playin' five-card stud by the stairs,
Lily had two queens, she was hopin' for a third to match her pair.
Outside the streets were fillin' up, the window was open wide,
A gentle breeze was blowin', you could feel it from inside.
Lily called another bet and drew up the Jack of Hearts.*

Poker has also spread back into the rest of the world, with its new Americanized flavoring. It has grown particularly popular in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, and has won many converts as well in the nations of the Pacific Rim and the Caribbean.

Of course, the vagaries of law have historically determined just when and where it's legal to play poker, and this has certainly had an effect on the game. In the U.S., the 20th century has been particularly confusing, with federal, state, and local laws overriding and often contradicting one another.

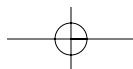
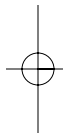
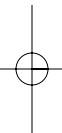
At several points in the modern era, poker was completely outlawed in the U.S. (along with all other forms of gambling), except in a few designated jurisdictions like Las Vegas and Atlantic City. This didn't stop people from playing, of course, in home games and back-room card clubs. But it did have the effect of stigmatizing the game to a degree and hampering its growth into the mainstream.

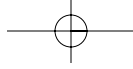
In the last few decades, poker and other forms of gambling have gradually crept back into the light of legal legitimacy. Consider that now you can play not only in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, but also in Detroit, New Orleans, parts of California, Mississippi, and Connecticut, and in about one million riverboats, Native American game rooms, and locally regulated clubs in between.

The Poker Pro

There have always been poker pros, but in the old days of prohibition, these brave souls were forced to make the rounds in secret, playing in illegal cash games and underground clubs. Poker legends such as Doyle Brunson, Amarillo Slim, and Sailor Roberts came up the hard way, playing dangerous games in dangerous places.

This latest expansion of legalized poker has given rise to a new breed of player—the legitimate poker pro who makes a living playing cash games and tournaments around the country (and around the world). These days, top-tier poker professionals





like Howard Lederer, Kathy Liebert, and Chris “Jesus” Ferguson, shown in Figures 3.5 through 3.7, can make a legitimate (and rather healthy) living without risking life and limb. (Mostly. Depends on whether you’re at a table with Phil Hellmuth.)



Phil Hellmuth, Jr., one of the top tournament players and a former WSOP No Limit Hold ‘Em champ, has a reputation as a volatile player. We’re just kidding you, Phil. . .



Figure 3.4 Howard Lederer

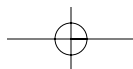
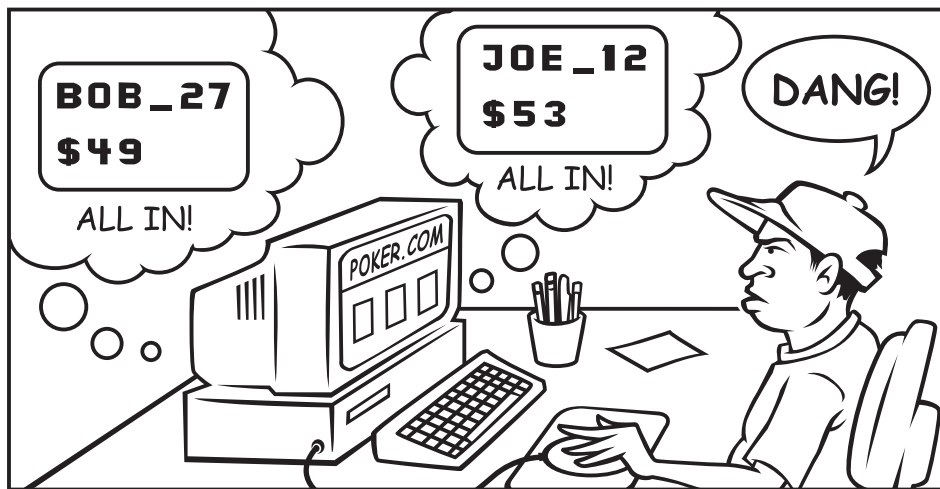


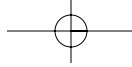
Figure 3.5 Kathy Liebert



Figure 3.6 Chris “Jesus” Ferguson

Once again we find ourselves on the new frontier of the online game. As Chris MoneyMaker and many other Internet players have ably demonstrated, online play can lead to fortune and glory, with a little skill and a lot of luck. Will we see the emergence of the Internet poker pro? Maybe. Maybe it’ll be you! Maybe it’ll be me! Probably, it will be my Mom—with her unearthly luck, I wouldn’t bet against it.





Poker has a long and rich history that has informed in many ways the game we play today. So let's jump back into the practical and procedural end of things and in the next chapter, begin the task of assembling the basic poker know-how that you need to win.

Poker Terms Used in This Chapter

Dead Man's Hand The five-card poker hand said to be held by Wild Bill Hickok when he was shot dead at the table: black aces and black eights, the fifth card in dispute; considered to be an unlucky hand in poker.

Tarot deck A set of playing cards used in fortunetelling; possibly a forerunner of the modern 52-card deck.

Three-Card Monte A gambling game using playing cards, in which a dealer uses sleight-of-hand to deceive a potential bettor.

wild card A card that can serve as any other card in making your hand.

