

THE EDUCATION OF A POKER PLAYER



Robert Jameson

The Education of a Poker Player
by Robert Jameson

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Introduction

A lot of people enjoy playing poker as a hobby. Perhaps they sit around the kitchen table once a week with a few mates or work colleagues. Perhaps they dabble in the odd low-stakes game or tournament on the internet. Perhaps they play a casino poker tournament once in a while.

Most people don't intend to make much of a profit from this little hobby. They don't plan on storming Las Vegas. They haven't set their sights on becoming the next Poker World Champion - but they do want to improve. They just feel they'd get more satisfaction from the game if they can clearly see that they are gradually getting better at it.

Very likely, they'll pick up a poker book - possibly from one of the famous poker pros - and hope it will improve their game.

What sometimes comes next is a bit of a letdown. People often find themselves feeling disillusioned by such books. They don't particularly find that these books help them very much. They don't notice any particular improvement in their win rate. They don't feel that all that advice has improved their prospects in their home game to any noticeable degree. They don't feel that they've got very far.

They may very well find that the (relatively) advanced strategies described in the poker pro books actually count against them when applied in their local game or in low-stakes internet games. Typically, they read all about how to bluff successfully - but find that no matter how carefully they bluff in the kitchen-table game, they get called anyway!

Perhaps some advanced tactic sticks in their mind from the book, they try it out and it fails miserably. It's all very well finding some subtle way to outplay Gus Hanson, Doyle Brunson or Phil Ivey - but these poker superstars never seem to accept your invitations. It's difficult to get these people or anyone

like them to turn up to your game. All most people really want to learn from a poker book is how to beat John the next-door neighbour.

I think there's a problem with many modern poker books. In an attempt to be cutting edge, they sometimes miss out on or skimp over the fundamentals. They don't provide what people are actually looking for. They miss out on the basics that could really make a difference in the kitchen-table game, whilst trying to impress with the sort of advanced tactics that don't actually help very much.

This book is for people who want to improve their game, but they're not looking to the big tournament in Vegas (at least, not yet) - they just want to see a real improvement in their performance in their weekly game down the social club or in Mike's kitchen.

This book is for people who already know the rules of Texas Hold'Em. That's probably the main - and possibly the only - game you've played. It is for people with a basic knowledge of the game who want to get better.

This book deals with the fundamentals of poker, whatever the variation you play. I mainly refer to the game of No-Limit Texas Hold'Em in my examples - as that is the most widely played and widely known game in the modern era. Most of the advice in this book, however, can be applied in almost any poker variation.

If you've never read any poker strategy books, that's great, because this is the place to start - this is strategy for typical players looking to improve the fundamentals of their game. It's not for advanced players.

On the other hand, if you have read poker strategy books or magazines or listened to poker 'experts' on the television, but haven't found that the advice you've received is getting you very far in your home

game, then this book is designed to focus your mind on the fundamentals that those other sources of advice often overlook.

A Traditional Education

Poker is an incredible game. Like most great games, the rules are simple. Yet, whilst it takes only minutes to learn how to play, it usually takes some years to learn how to play well.

Following the dawn of the millennium, poker enjoyed a huge expansion in its popularity. Many millions of new players took up poker, excited by the big-money world championship events or by the poker shows on the television. The internet made poker available in your own living room twenty four hours a day and set out a path to possible fame and fortune for anyone with a telephone line and a computer. You could - and many people did - start off with a few freeroll, online tournaments and work your way to the \$10,000-entry World Poker Championships Main Event in Las Vegas. Young and old alike took up the game in their millions. Nevertheless, when I sit down at a poker table - whether it's a local game or a casino tournament - I generally find that modern players have rarely received the standard of poker education that I was lucky enough to receive. Frankly, it's like taking candy from a baby!

Now, I'm a thoroughly modern player - most of my hands have been played on the internet - but I learnt my poker before the internet age and I received a thoroughly traditional poker education.

I feel very fortunate to have had such a traditional poker upbringing. The modern poker player's education is often very narrow by comparison and, though it can sometimes appear advanced, is often painfully shallow and lacking in a fundamental understanding of the game.

I've been fascinated by the art of poker since I first

took an interest as a teenager. Perhaps it was the saloon bar poker of westerns that first drew me in - a setting and atmosphere we inaccurately recreated in the kitchen of our digs at university during our regular Monday night games. It was there - surrounded by dirty saucepans and with a table almost choked by glasses, ashtrays and cans of cheap lager - that I first learnt to play.

My poker heart, of course, is still at that kitchen table at college where some of the important lessons, not just of poker, but of life, were learnt!

I've played poker in swanky London casinos. I've played in Vegas. I've played countless thousands of hands online. I've played heads-up, at full tables and in multi-table tournaments with thousands of entries. I've played for pennies and I've played for big bucks.

I've played Hold'Em, Omaha, Draw, Stud and some of the most grotesque, bastardised versions of double-barrelled, high-low, two pots to win, with three draws and deuces and sevens wild poker known to mankind. I'm not a famous poker player and playing poker is not my day job, but I've gained a lot from playing poker. What I am is someone who can walk into a typical social game or typical casino game in a small town and feel confident that I know what I am doing, confident that there won't be many, and probably not any, people in the game who have anything approaching my wealth of experience or level of expertise.

Understandably, from my perspective, most poker players don't play very well. Watching a typical game is an experience of witnessing the ineptitude of your average poker player. Most hands are marked by several pieces of bad play, most of which go unnoticed by most other players.

If I were to walk into a typical home game or a typical casino tournament, what I would generally see is a lot of poker players who don't seem to have grasped the

fundamentals of the game. They've picked up ideas from other players, from the television or from online games and poker magazines. They get by, but the fundamentals are missing.

You can play poker, you can play it successfully, yet not really understand what it is about, what it means, its nature and its essence. There are many poker books that teach you the rules of the game. There are many books, often by big-name players, that offer to teach you advanced tactics and strategies - but there are not so many that teach you to truly understand the game.

Poker books often concentrate on how to play specific hands, on particular tactics and individual plays - but tend to rather skimp over the essential principles of the game. I want to encourage you to be a student, a connoisseur and a scholar of the game, not just another player.

Showbusiness

If you watch poker shows on the television, it's easy to get the wrong impression of how people play.

For a start, you often see edited highlights - they don't bother showing you all the hands when the star player folded straightaway. Instead, they concentrate on the times when monster hands collide, when people play big with very marginal hands and when players run outrageous bluffs.

TV shows often concentrate on the final stages of tournaments when the blinds are massive and people are forced to take big risks and be very aggressive. TV poker is also, often, short-handed - and when there are only a few people at a table, you don't need such good cards to win.

You should remember that TV poker players are trying to build a reputation - showing off for the cameras! They want everyone to see the rubbish cards they play with. Ask yourself why they do this. The answer is that they each want to become famous, get invited back for future shows, get sponsorship deals and build a reputation as a spectacular bluffer so that they can make easy money for years, getting callers when they do have genuinely good hands.

Don't be fooled by what you see on the television. The people you see on these television shows - they're not really poker players as such - they're in showbusiness! Their money comes from endorsements, advertising, branded merchandise, TV show appearance money, commentating, writing columns in newspapers or articles for internet sites, writing books, advising on Hollywood films and endorsing video games - it's showbusiness, not poker!

Let's get away from the ludicrous notion that what these luvvies do during television tournaments is of any more than the slightest relevance to how you should be playing on poker nights round a friend's

house! The way of playing poker you see on the TV doesn't always translate very well to the kitchen-table game.

Aggression

I want to begin by debunking some of the absurd modern myths about the way we all 'ought' to play poker.

Much of the poker advice you hear from poker commentators on the TV or read in poker magazines and poker books may actually be of little or no use to you at all - and may very well be highly misleading.

For example, lots of poker 'experts' go on and on about how 'essential' it is to be aggressive.

Being aggressive means actively betting rather than just passively calling. More specifically, being 'aggressive' means that you bet strongly and reasonably frequently. You bet with good hands, but also with some marginal hands and sometimes when you have nothing at all. You are, essentially, attacking your opponents with your bets, putting them in difficult situations and forcing them to make tough decisions about whether to fold or to cough up a sizeable amount of dough to stay in the hand. You hope to pick up a lot of small pots when nobody has any particularly good cards. You also hope to be sufficiently boisterous that, when you do have a very good hand, people might suspect you don't have very much and may call you down with a losing hand.

It *sounds* like a good strategy and, in some circumstances, it is. Being overly passive is a common fault of many players. They passively call too often and don't do enough active betting. Many players do need to be more aggressive.

However, the modern fad for being highly aggressive leads some people to believe that trying to bully other players off the table is the only successful way to play.

In fact, however, being aggressive may not be a very good strategy at all in the circumstances most ordinary players are actually going to find themselves in most of the time in their ordinary home games. This may be especially true when other players at the table are competing in a silly, TV-inspired competition in trying to be the top pit bull at the table.

Think about this: If you sit and just play tight against good players, they'll bluff you out of most hands and when you do occasionally have a bet with a good hand, they'll just fold and, overall, you won't make any money.

So, against these players, it makes sense to disguise your good hands by being more 'aggressive' and repeatedly betting with marginal hands or having a bluff with nothing at all, as well as with your good hands. Now you're facing them with a challenge. Now, when you place a bet, they don't know if you've genuinely got the hand or not. You're putting them in a position where they can easily make mistakes. They might fold when you have little or nothing at all - or they might call you when you really do have the goods.

If you can subtly confuse your opponents and make them guess wrong slightly more often than they guess right, you might make a modest profit. And that's probably all it will be - a very modest profit - as you're often working with fine margins and they'll be trying exactly the same tricks on you as you're trying on them.

Against good players, this aggression has a point - it's all part of a strategy to deceive and disorientate your opponents. But none of this deception is remotely necessary if your opponents are rank amateurs who just aren't paying attention.

If you can just bet big when you've got good cards and get called every time, why would you want to use any other strategy? Or, if there are plenty of

aggressive players at the table, you can just let them bet and raise and then you can re-raise them and take their money.

If you do what the pros often recommend and bet aggressively in your typical home game, it might not work and it might be totally counterproductive. The idiots you play against just keep calling and calling - they'll call when you have a good hand, but they'll get their money back by calling you when you're betting with very little. A lot of the time, they won't even notice that you are representing a really good hand. If they have any moderately good hand, they won't be pushed off it by your aggressive betting - they're just not going to let it go!

In such circumstances, you'll often make much more money by taking far fewer risks and just sitting back and playing almost entirely just with good hands, with only occasional exceptions.

You'll be playing a fairly standard, old-fashioned, tight and conservative game, with just the occasional stab or minor bluff to throw people off the scent a bit.

Such a playing style and strategy may be unfashionable - but, in many circumstances, it still works perfectly well and may indeed be far more profitable than the fashionable 'aggressive' tactics commonly used in the modern game.

In most cases, your opponents won't realise you're only betting with good cards - because, sometimes, you won't get called and people may well assume you were bluffing, even when you weren't. People are suspicious - they can't help it! They'll happily convince themselves you were bluffing whenever they don't know for sure that you weren't.

Against good players, you may use aggressive play to confuse them. Against poor players, a single bluff can maintain an air of mystery about your play for weeks at a stretch.

Poker pros, poker books and poker magazines, with

their constant insistence that you *must* play aggressively, are urging you to adopt a strategy that might be marginally profitable against good players (and, even then, only if you play well).

I've got a much better strategy for you: Don't play against good players! Why scrabble for scraps amongst other good players when you can make a killing off players who don't know their arses from their elbows?

To make an aggressive strategy work, you usually have to have considerable skill and you have to play well. You've got to know when to stop betting and when to fold to that re-raise, even though you've already put quite a bit into the pot. And that's not something a lot of players find it easy to do. Even when you play it well, it might not be the most profitable strategy anyway.

Why bother when, in most games, all you have to do is wait for some decent cards, let the idiots bet and call your re-raises and then you can watch the chips gravitate inexorably to your side of the table?

It's worth emphasising this point again: If you play regularly against highly-skilled players, playing aggressively might be a good strategy - but why the bloody-hell would you want to play against highly-skilled players? You want to play against idiots - and, in all probability, you do!

Playing hyper-aggressively against the average home game poker player is often either unnecessary or totally counterproductive. Often, aggressive play will simply mean you are taking unnecessary risks when, given a little patience, the money is there to be had for almost no risk at all.

Poker is not like other games and sports. In other games and sports, players want to test themselves by playing against the best. In poker, picking out weak players, identifying the mark - that's all part of the skill of the game. A poker player who deliberately

matches himself up against top-class players - well, they're kind of missing the point of the game! Their ego is getting the better of them - and good poker players don't let that happen.

It's also important to note that some of the poor advice about betting aggressively comes from online poker rooms, the poker magazines they support and the poker pros they have on their payrolls.

Ask yourself why online poker sites encourage players to bet aggressively. Poker sites often take a 'rake' from each hand - often 5% of the value of the pot. Players betting aggressively against each other allows big pots to develop over even just moderately good cards and thus helps maximise the amount of rake money the house takes from each hand. Is it coincidence that the poker industry encourages so much aggressive betting? I think not!

Good online players could just sit back and wait to take easy money off the money-laden amateurs who play for fun and expect to lose - but this fashion for being aggressive means even the better players are frantically betting aggressively against each other. This creates big pots more frequently and means that more of the money brought to the table by the amateurs ends up being paid in rake to the house rather than ending up, as it should do, in the bank accounts of the more highly-skilled players at the table.

The house gets a much bigger profit from the 'aggressive' table than they do from the passive table where the good players sit and wait patiently for the amateurs to give up their stacks.

When a rake is involved, the main effect of aggressive play is not that the good players will end up with the money of the worst players (These unskilled players were going to lose their money anyway!). The main effect is that much of the money that should have ended up in the hands of the best

players, actually ends up being paid to the house in rake - and unnecessarily so!

The aggressive tactics of modern poker are fashionable, but they are rarely essential and, in your typical home game, in low-stakes online games or in any game where there is a rake, can often be counterproductive.

I love mixing it up in an aggressive game. I've played a lot of heads-up poker, so I know the benefits of aggressive play as well as anyone, but aggressive play is not the best answer to every poker situation. You don't have to bully the whole table every time you play. On many occasions, you can make more profit by adopting a much quieter, more traditional, less aggressive approach.

The Standard Bet

Another favourite of clueless commentators is their overly-conservative and fastidious devotion to the 'standard bet.'

For those unfamiliar with the concept, the idea is that, if you ever raise the big blind pre-flop in a game of Hold'Em, you should always raise it by the exact same standard amount - typically three or four times the big blind.

You do this if you have pocket aces and you do it if you are making a positional bet with nothing whatsoever. If you bet at all, you make the standard bet, regardless of what cards you have or of why you are placing a bet.

The rationale behind this strategy is that it helps you disguise your hand. You don't want the size of your bet to give you away. You don't want your opponents to be able to work out that you bet three times the big blind when you have a pair of queens, four times the big blind with kings and anything more means you can reliably be put on a pair of aces. So, instead, you employ the 'standard bet.'

The trouble is that there's only any point in this strategy of disguise if any of your opponents are actually paying attention in the first place. Why restrict yourself to a standard bet if no disguise is necessary? If you can bet more with a really good hand and still get called, then why not do so?

Even against good players, the standard bet is very defensive. It is an attempt to take away an advantage your opponents might have (if they learn to read your bets), but takes away one of your own chief weapons in the process. The standard bet may give you a measure of disguise, but it does so at the expense of an opportunity to mislead your opponents.

Rather than letting it be known that there is no pattern in the way you bet - because you always bet the same amount - why not let them *think* there *is* a

reliable pattern? You can establish the idea of a pattern in the other players' minds and then simply deviate from that pattern whenever you want to fool them and pick up a big pot in the process.

The 'standard bet' strategy indicates an attitude of defeat. "I give up on playing poker!" is what it says. Choosing the amount to bet is a major skill of the game. Why would a good player voluntarily choose to deny himself the opportunity of being able to vary his bets to his own advantage? It's bollocks!

Yes, in a good-standard game, there is a certain logic behind it - but around the kitchen table, it's often totally pointless. Most amateur players work hard at deceiving themselves - and achieve this feat very consistently without any help from their opponents. In some cases, if you try to deceive them, that might only cancel out their own attempts at deceiving themselves and they'll end up making the right decision!

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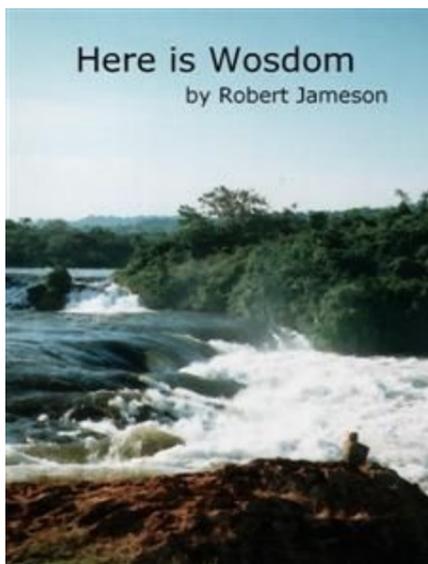
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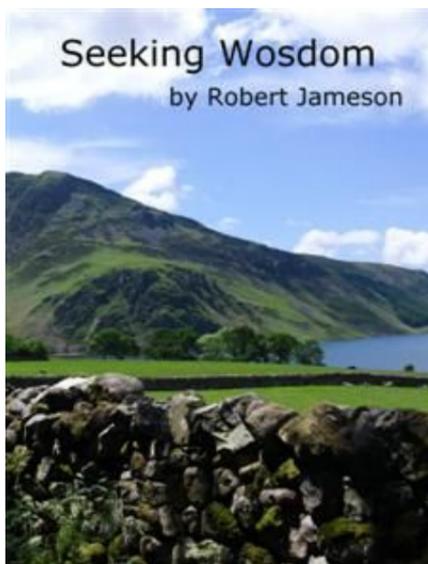


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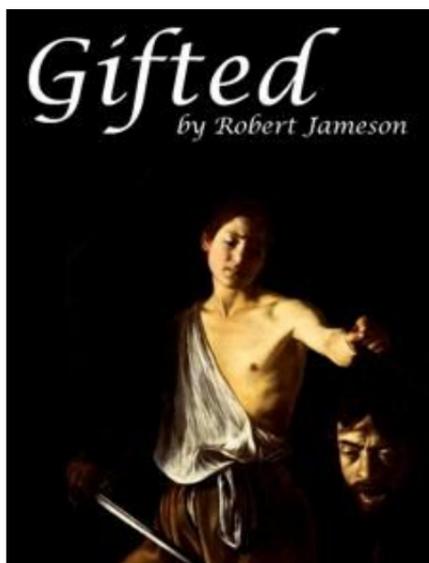


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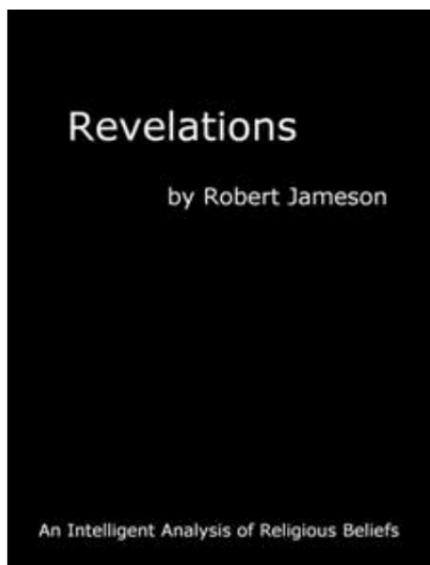


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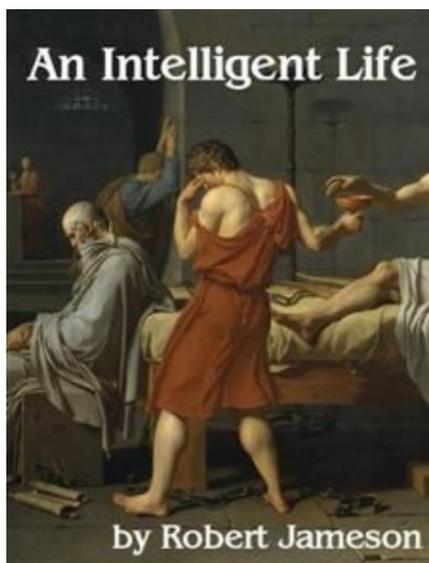


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