

Texas Show'em

Holger Stadel Borum

The third prototype challenge in my game design course was to take an existing game, modify a single rule, look at what that rule change did and design around it if possible. We took the game Texas Hold'em and made a rule change so that players are not allowed to see their own hands they but instead are allowed to see the hand of every other player. In this essay I will look into how that changed the game of Texas Hold'em. Therefor I will first describe regular Texas Hold'em and then Texas Show'em.

Texas Hold'em is a competitive game, the game features a high degree of random elements in the form of random cards being dealt, so the game has features of both agon and alea. Players do not have perfect information in the game and the game can be viewed as a process of players trying to gain information about the hands of their opponents. while they at the same time has to give misleading information about their own hands. This is done mainly through bidding, which is structured in a very tight loop. When a player has a turn she gets to either fold, check or raise, and afterwards she gets to see other players reaction to her action. Some of the hand negotiation is also done by players talking to each other and looking at opponents physical reaction while playing. In the game each player is the artisan of her own fortune, at least I have never seen anyone players being able to cooperate during the game. Lastly the game has a positive feedback loop, being the chip-leader puts you in a better position to gain more chips. And since it is difficult, not to say impossible¹, to team up on one single player the game is inherently snowbally. From my experience I would say, that the game is normally played in a very serious setting. Even if no real world money is at stake players often take pride in winning the game and outsmarting their opponents. I have a couple of times experienced serious players getting angry at less serious players because they play the game less serious and therefor less predictable, at least that is the claim. I think that is one of the reason that you often hear people stating that you can only really play poker if real world money is at stake, because this forces every player to be serious. Another reason probably is that the aspect of real world money makes players more emotionally invested in the game, and might introduce a feature of illinx in the game.

Texas show'em was not designed with any specific play experience in mind, rather we decided to change a rule and then see what it led to. The most obvious change to the game is the level of information each player has. In Texas hold'em a player knows a constant number of cards, 2, while in Texas show'em players knows of a number of cards that is proportional to the number of players, $n-2$ where n is the number of players. This means that two-player

¹I prefer not to make ultimate statements about games where I know I have only scratched the surface of very complex interactions

Texas hold'em and two-player Texas show'em is essentially the same game, but with more than two players things starts to differ. The main difference is the information a player receives when a bid is placed. In Texas hold'em a bid essentially says, "This is currently my evaluation of the board state knowing my two cards". From that other players have to figure out what those two cards are. In Texas show'em a bid says, "This is currently my evaluation of the board states knowing n-2 cards, where two of them is yours.". From that other players have to try to extract information about their own two cards. This process seems more difficult because more information serves as a basis for the bid. This also seemingly changes how bluffing works. I am not quite sure because I have not played the game anywhere near enough to actually understand what is going on. In hold'em a bluff works by stating that you have better cards than you actually have, which makes it makes it possible for a player to win even if she has a bad hand. "All" she has to do is convince other players, she has a really good hand. In show'em a bluff works by stating that all other players have bad hands. Even though a player can make this statement, it is difficult to make it believable, since other players can both see part of the basis of the decision and quite accurately estimate the winning chances of that player. This is because all other players will be able to see if the player actually has a bad hand, and they do not have to necessarily rely on that player for gaining information about their own hand. This means that a player will tend to evaluate her winning chances against the best hand they see on the table, which makes the best hand more likely to win. Unless several players try to bluff the best hand into thinking she has a bad hand, that player will be able to get information about her hand. Once again I am not quite sure this is how the game actually works, but from our play test I had the experience that the best hand is very likely to win, since other players simply tend to fold against it.

Another way in which show'em is clearly different from hold'em is that players are able cooperate, which might mean that the game is inherently broken. If two players chooses to cooperate, they can simply tell each other what hands they have and no other player would gain information from this exchange. Unless one of these players chooses to betray the other, the game will degrade into a game of pure chance, since the remaining players are left with the possibility of either teaming up with someone else or loosing. Therefor show'em to some degree contains a negative feedback loop, where players are likely to team up against the chip leader. It follows that the game is not suitable for playing with real world money. However the game may be suitable to play in a less serious manner than hold'em, where players lie to each other about what cards they have while looking them straight into the eyes. Since the game is broken it also means that serious players are less likely to get angry at less serious players, since they do not have to prove that they are good at the game. This is the only aspect of the show'em that I can think of being more attractive to regular hold'em.

In this essay I have first analyzed how the game Texas hold'em works and how

the game changes if players are only able to see the hands of their opponents. I have argued that bluffing works differently and that it seems like the player with the best hand is more likely to win. I have also argued that the game is probably inherently broken and therefor could only potentially be played in a not so competitive fashion.