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## Introduction

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Many poker players fail simply by ignoring the necessity to work on their mental game. They leave massively harmful habits unchecked and let their emotions dictate their fate. Congratulations! By purchasing this book, you have avoided the first hurdle. Now, let's get to work.

Poker players often talk about going on 'tilt' - a word that immediately conjures images of angrily throwing money into the pot or childish berating opponents, but that covers very little of the subject matter of this book.

This is a book about the poker player's tendency to malfunction in a variety of ways: glaring and subtle; sudden and gradual. Instead of talking about 'tilt'; which I feel limits the scope of mental game exploration to outbursts of a dramatic and intense nature; in this book, I discuss the many common ways in which the human brain goes wrong in understanding and reacting to poker's challenges. The struggles I cover belong mostly to the domain of the mental game. Very little technical poker knowledge is required to benefit from this book.

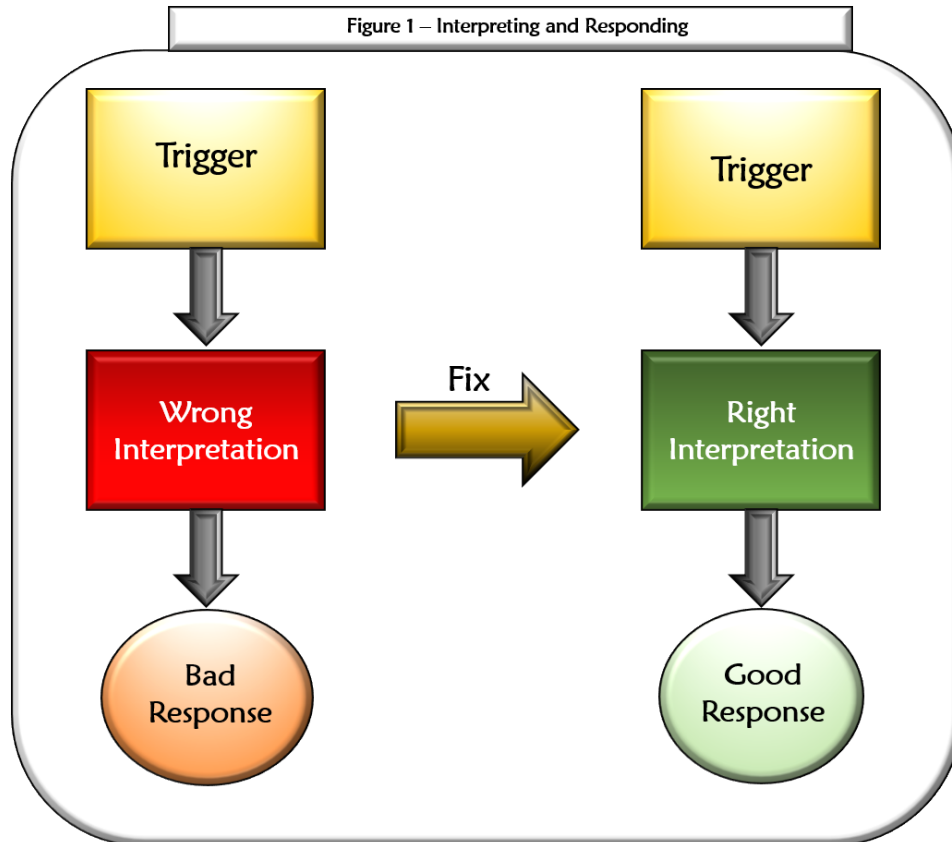
Our thesis is that the many faulty interpretations our brains make of common poker situations lead us to suboptimal responses, which can seriously jeopardise our chances of success - even when we are strategically savvy. I call these mental-game errors 'misfires' rather than 'mistakes' because they are usually nothing more than normal human-wiring that happens not to work in the very different realm of poker. I call the process of overcoming these mental-game obstacles 'rewiring'. This is a book about changing the way your mind handles common poker stimuli to avoid the mental-game traps that cost most players a great deal of money at the tables.

The principle teaching model of this book can be summarised by talking about a mental-game problem as having three ingredients:

- Firstly, there is a trigger that is outside of the poker player's control, for example, the pot getting big, or experiencing a losing session.
- Next there comes a faulty interpretation of the poker situation such as: 'I must win this pot at all costs' or 'losing money = failure'. This view is often taken subconsciously and occurs because the player has learned to interpret similar situations outside of poker in a certain way.
- Finally, there is a response, which constitutes the problematic behaviour - for example - calling a bet that you know is unprofitable to call or playing a four

hour session to chase recent losses.

Have a look at the figure below. This template will become extremely familiar throughout the course of this book.



The solutions (rewires) that I suggest for all of the poker misfires dealt with in this book work from the premise that it is the second stage of this process - the faulty interpretation of the poker situation - which must be fixed. The trigger which precedes it is uncontrollable, and the response which follows it would, in fact be sensible, if only the interpretation were accurate to begin with. Take the example of the calling station, who has to make sure that he is not being bluffed. The trigger here is facing a big bet, the interpretation is that not being bluffed is the primary objective of this spot, and the response is to call without doing the proper analysis. The choice to call follows rationally from the flawed interpretation. This is why we must fix the middle link in the chain.

**It is the way we view poker situations that causes problems; not the situations themselves; and not how we respond to them.**

This book begins by exploring how and why humans are not mentally prepared for the emotional and logical challenges of poker. We then cover the various categories of

mental game leak, known henceforth as 'misfires' and the effects that these can have on a player's progress. In Chapter 3, I present my four step technique for rewiring the brain to cope with poker as efficiently as it has evolved to cope with real life. In Chapter 4, we run through a list of the most common mental-game fixes, known henceforth as 'rewires' that I have helped my private students achieve in the last decade. In Chapter 5, I share some true stories about some of my recent students who have made the most progress in improving their mental-game by rewiring their mind in the manner recommended in this book. Finally, in Chapter 6, we move on to tackle the top 10 poker roadblocks, which are more permanent and less situational mental-game problems than misfires.

The title: 'Poker Therapy' comes from the idea that just as people can benefit from therapy in life; which is an organised and deliberate attempt to change how the human mind works for the better; poker players can improve their performance through similar methods. I have spent the last few years of my poker coaching career ensuring that I can assist poker players, not just technically, but in their mental-game too. I hope that the methods in this book can help you, as they have helped my students, to overcome the obstacles in your mental-game and realise your full poker potential.

Our journey begins with an examination of why we need Poker Therapy in the first place.

## Chapter 1 - The Alien World Problem

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Most of us agree that the ability to function like a robot would serve us well in poker. We would be able to eliminate emotional interference and focus solely on the factors that matter to the expected value (EV) of our decisions. Unfortunately, we as humans, shall never achieve cold, calculating machine status. We suffer from mental game problems that are a function of our design, and in part, a function of successful real-life programming. The thesis of this book is that most of the things we refer to as 'tilt' or 'mental game leaks' in poker are simply the reactions of a healthy human, who has been cast into an alien world that his species has never evolved to handle, and in which, he is supposed to feel frequently disturbed.

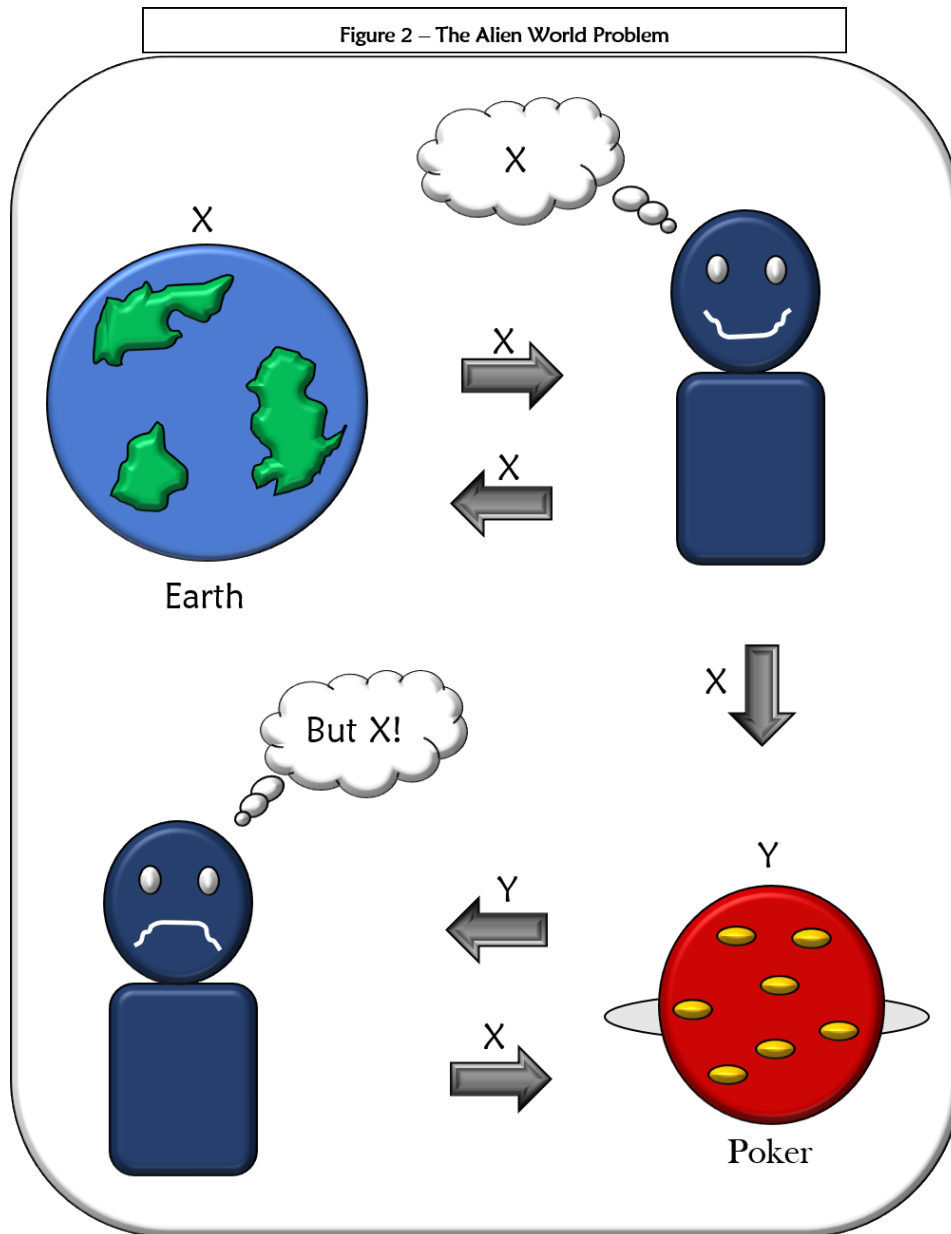
This sums up the Alien World Problem. To devote yourself to the challenge of becoming a successful poker player is to sail into waters your mind has never even seen on a map. It is no wonder that you fear losing; chase losses; behave irrationally during bad sessions; experience anxiety that dwarfs anything you commonly feel in real life; feel compulsions to click what you know to be the wrong button; make bad folds due to an overwhelming fear; act impulsively in the spots that require the most careful consideration...and so on and so on.

Despite poker assuring us repeatedly that the way we have learned to operate in the real world is no longer compatible in this new realm, we refuse to listen. This is not our fault. It's all down to human wiring, which makes strong and rigid judgments about the way the world is early on in life. Some of the processes our minds run correctly in life, and incorrectly in poker, are inherited through our genetic code. They are completely ingrained.

Moreover, because you grew up in the same world in which you learned these rules, your brain gets to continuously reinforce its collection of habits as 'correct'. Positive confirmation that these habits truly work is what makes our subconscious processes feel so natural and so difficult to unlearn. In poker, this leads to many faulty interpretation processes becoming seen as 'reliable' views of the world by our subconscious minds. As we saw in the introduction, these faulty interpretation processes are our nemeses in this book.

For most of us, our poker journey looks like this:

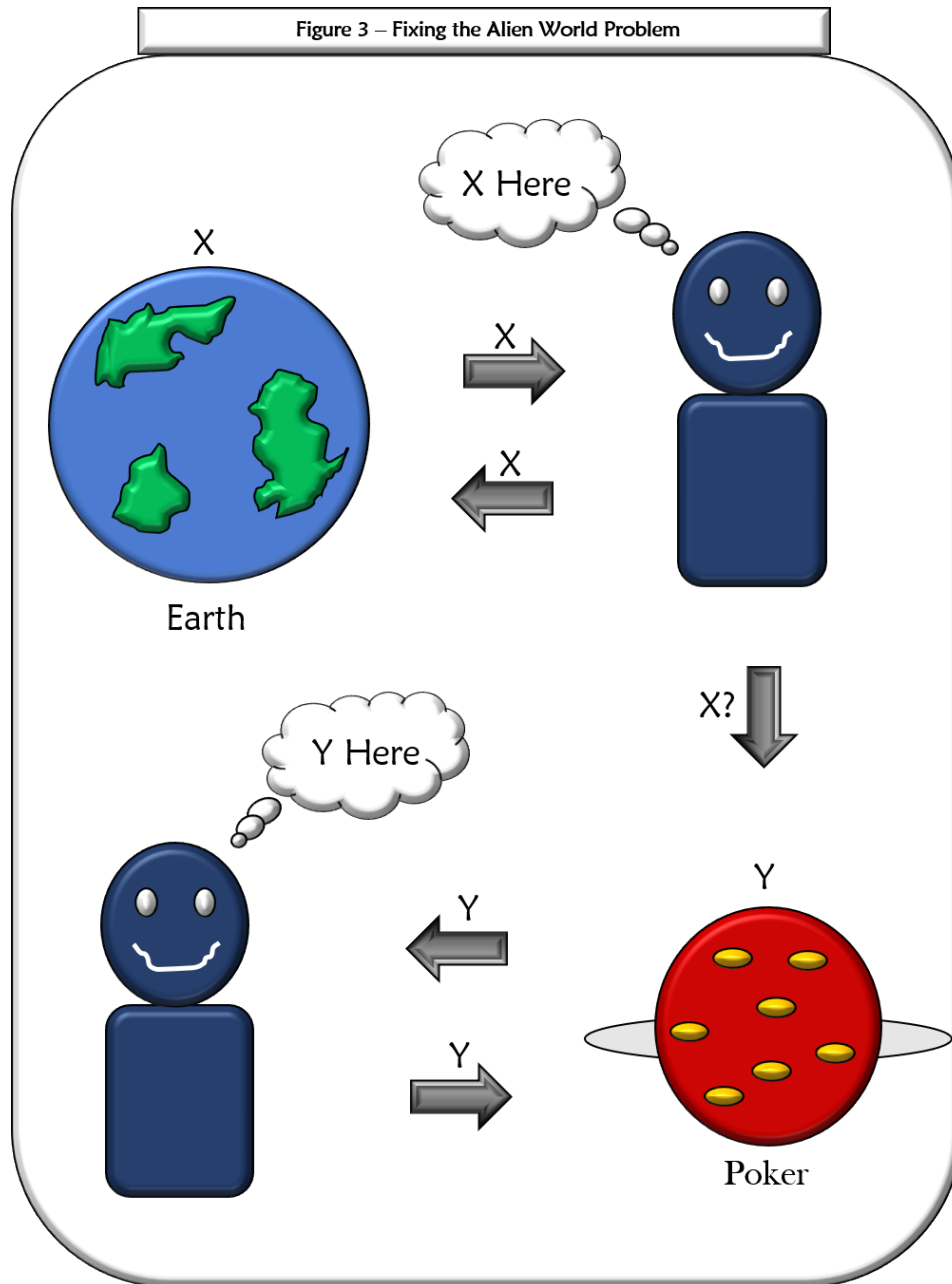
Figure 2 – The Alien World Problem



Let's take an example. You lose three coin flips right at the end of a break even session to end play three buy-ins down. You lament: 'this is unfair, what a load of \*\*\*\*.' That's X. It would usually be very unfair to suffer such injustice in real life and so you are programmed not to put up with it. Such travesty would usually be caused by someone taking advantage of you and so you perceive a culpable evil - in this case, luck. In fact, in poker, losing three 50/50s in a row is perfectly fair and will happen in 125 of 1000 realities where you enter three 50/50s. You are simply in one of those 125 realities. That acceptance is Y.

Because we are creatures of habit, we thoughtlessly run the wrong interpretations of poker situations because taking similar views in the real world has served us so well. Poker is a realm where Y set of universal truths are operational but we act as if X are

still true. The aim of this book is to see that poker demands a different approach. We want to see Y for what it is and build a new set of rules with which to interpret the poker world. The student who has read this book and put the work in will eventually react as follows:



By making this concrete distinction between state of affairs X and state of affairs Y, the poker player frees himself of his real life conditioning and learns how to thrive in poker like humans have thrived on earth.

Before we learn how to adapt to our new environment, let us explore some of the ways in which our hard-wiring is so naturally incompatible with poker. Bad interpretation



processes exist due to the following discrepancies between poker and real life.

## The Luckometer

Perhaps the most obvious difference between the realms of poker and life is the amount of luck in each. Our imaginary toy today is the luckometer - a variance measuring device. If the luckometer reads 5 in life, it reads 95 in poker. We are naturally equipped to deal with a reading of 5. At this level of luck, a bad thing will sometimes occur, but almost never will a flurry of them pummel our patience in quick succession. When a car zooms into the puddle next to us and soaks us through, we tend to shrug it off and get on with the day. It almost never happens a second time and we are very unlikely to become furious and start making a series of dreadful choices due to how it makes us feel. If that same episode happened ten times in one day, however, it is very possible that many of us would become overwhelmed with negative emotion and start behaving quite sub-optimally. We might snap at loved ones over nothing or break down and cry to a stranger about how horrifically unlucky our day has been. This is the life equivalent of going on tilt.

In poker, the eighth, ninth, and tenth soakings of the day are often just around the corner. The reading of 95 on the luckometer warns us of this danger, and cognitively speaking, we are well aware of it. Subconsciously, however, the circuits are still built for a reading of 5. This is why we react with fury (fight) or panic (flight) when things go extremely badly. The fact that we cannot control the mental circuits that govern our responses to extreme luck fills us with a sense of helplessness; as though we are slaves to the tantrums of our subconscious mind. We shall see later on, much to our relief that it does not have to be this way.

Poker is an alien world because the luck involved is much greater than that with which we have learned to cope.

## Causal Feedback

Causal feedback is our process for making sense of the world. Many of the things we do have an effect on the world and many of the things that happen in the world have an effect on us. Throughout our lives we learn the most common cause and effect patterns via the process of causal feedback which I shall illustrate by telling you a story from my childhood.

I must have been about three when my Dad accidentally left a razor by the bath. I went to grab it out of curiosity. My thoughts:[new object, must identify effect of object] but he stopped me before I could touch it. 'You don't touch the razor, Pete, it's very dangerous.' [Razor is mysterious, must find out why it's dangerous]. Some months later, I wandered into the bathroom to find the razor sitting on the sink, within reach. Excitedly, I grabbed it and cut my hand. Screaming, crying, and sulking soon followed. [Razor bad. Razor cause blood and pain].

The causal feedback process identified an input (grab razor) and an output (pain and blood). We can formalise the feedback it sent to my long-term memory as follows: grab razor = pain and blood. As it almost always is in life, the causal feedback process was successful on that occasion. I made a correct and reliable rule about grabbing the razor and did not cut myself again.

In poker, we know consciously that good choices often cause bad consequences and vice-versa, but our subconscious wiring does not understand this fact. When the beginner 3-Bets the button opener with AQs and loses a big pot, the causal feedback process initiates whether he likes it or not. [3-Bet AQs = lose money]. This is why my student shows up to lesson one with a 3% 3-Bet stat. For more experienced players, they know better than to just flat the AQs and the faulty feedback loop forms in a more difficult spot, but it still happens. One of the greatest steps we can take in the mental game is to overwrite the subconscious process of causal feedback with that of open-minded exploration. We need to replace [A then B therefore A causes B] with [A then B therefore nothing]. This is a lot more difficult than it sounds. The automatic clockwork of causal feedback is exactly why so many aspiring players find themselves being proud of bad bluffs when their opponent folds and berating themselves for good bluffs that happened to get called this time. It is normal to be outrageously results-oriented. It is human to be so, but again, we can change this. We shall learn exactly how to do this later on.

**Poker is an alien world because cause and effect do not follow one another in a reliable way. Rules that are formed over small samples of data often turn out to be wrong.**

## The Fairness Test

In the 1950s, a white male was many times more likely to get a job than a black female of equal employability. When a non-prejudice morally educated human appraises this

scenario, he reacts with disapproval. It is unfair.

You come home to find that your house has been burgled. The perpetrator is found but never convicted due to insignificant evidence. Unfair.

Hard working Jim applies for a promotion, but lazy John gets it because his Uncle is the manager - unfair.

If you agreed with my assessment of these three cases, it is because your own subconscious mind runs its own fairness test. When the result of the test is 'unfair' and the victim is you or someone you care about, the output is almost always anger - the brain's active expression of unhappiness (sadness is the passive variant). Poker is to the subconscious mind: the racist 1950s boss, the burglar, and Lazy John. It constantly does things to you that are assessed as 'unfair.'

Running bad for the third day in a row is actually perfectly fair. Every poker player experiences such bouts of variance at various points during his career. Poker is not so much a matter of who runs good or bad per se but of who is **currently** running good or bad. In the end we all have roughly the same overall luck.

**Poker is an alien world because many things that are actually fair fail the fairness test. Our subconscious cannot adapt the test for the realm of poker no matter how clearly we see that it needs to.**

## **Praise and Scorn**

During our first few years in the world, we have little to no moral autonomy. We rely on our parents for guidance as to which actions are permissible and which are not. When we exhibit behaviour that our parents consider positive, they praise us. When we put the cat in the tumble direr they scorn us. It is by dancing through this minefield of praise and scorn that we shape our character and form the habits we need to fit in to our society and thrive later in life. In doing so, we form yet another automated mental process, and, as far as poker is concerned, yet another obstacle - the instinct to repeat praised behaviour and avoid scorned behaviour.

It is very hard to learn to walk in poker because volatile short-term results play the role of the parent. On some days we get beaten for playing our A-game and on others, we are rewarded for sloppy lazy decision-making. Just yesterday, I discussed a hand with a student, in which we agreed that he had called a pot sized bet with something like

5-10% equity against the average opponent's range. He won by making that dreadful call and came into the coaching session proud of his action like a smug eight year-old with a new toy. Poker is a horrendous parent. 'Yes hit the dog again son, but don't dare clean your room or you'll be in for it.'

**Poker is an alien world because praise and scorn are dished out erratically. It is therefore very tricky to be sure that you are moving in the right direction.**

## Surrendering Resources

The man who tears down the street ripping up \$100 bills is perceived to be either very rich or very mad; and probably both. One of the most counter-intuitive things that we can do as humans is to commit energy and resources to something only to throw it away for no gain to ourselves or others, but this is precisely what we need to do in poker if we wish to be successful. **Fortune reversal tilt** is the term I have coined for situations in which the student begins a hand with a strong holding and then something bad happens that suggests he should now fold. Perhaps he holds **KK** pre-flop and 4-bets the aggressive regular only to be flatted and have the flop come down Ace-High. Maybe he flops a flush on **J63** and the turn and river are both sixes. In situations like these, and many far less extreme cases, the most profitable choice is often to fold. Folding, however, is difficult from a mental standpoint and the student feels an almost magnetic attachment to the pot due to his previous acquisition of a strong hand and his investment of chips into the middle.

This attachment exists because humans who felt no sense of possessiveness over their hard-earned resources did not survive very well. So many of the problems we face in the mental game of poker are a direct result of successful evolution. You are supposed to feel like folding is bad. It is bad, but possibly better than all of the alternatives. Retraining our minds to gladly surrender big pots when the evidence points that way will be one of the most important rewires in the chapters to come.

**Poker is an alien world because it is correct to invest time, resources, and energy into things we must often give up on.**

## Acting Immediately on Emotions

What is the purpose of emotion in life? To motivate us into taking beneficial action. If

we did not care about a situation, it would be difficult to generate the willpower and energy to actually pursue any goal within that context. We experience sadness when our loved ones are upset because that emotional process has run for millions of years and been selected for due to its ability to increase our odds of survival. Humans who did not care about their breeding partner's welfare were unlikely to keep said partner alive and healthy long enough to create healthy offspring.

In many of the cases where emotion inspires action, it does so instantly. There is little time to reflect upon or critique our own thinking. Rather, our decision-making process is automated so as to save precious time, which could be the difference between survival and death.

My girlfriend, who prefers fight to flight in times of physical danger, fondly recounts the story of the time she launched herself at a mugger in Ecuador, punching and kicking him until he released his grip on her friend's bag and went hobbling off into the distance. This reaction had to be instant to be effective. Calm consideration would have missed the point and the time to act would have passed. The friend would have been a camera and a few hundred dollars poorer before there had been time to perform poker-like rituals such as weighing up the factors or deciding upon the best line.

Because of this evolutionary need for some emotions to be acted upon instantaneously, it can be disastrous when these emotions occur suddenly in the middle of a poker session; where controlled thought is required. Many of the subconscious misfires that we shall examine later are of this knee-jerk nature, and these are understandably some of the most difficult mental-game leaks to prevent and cure.

The student has been getting 3-Bet all session. Hand after hand, his opponents refuse to fold and insist on waking up with the top of their ranges. By the end of the first hour, the student is reaching breaking point. His stores of willpower are all but depleted and the cracks in his mental game are ready to cave in, spilling toxic, emotionally charged thoughts all over the felt. With 100BB stacks, the student opens and that same pesky reg 3-Bets for the fifth time today. The student sees red. Defiant anger reaches an unacceptable level and the all-in button is pressed with **AQo**. This play is horrible compared with both calling, and 4-bet/folding for a cheaper price. Even outright folding is likely higher EV than shoving - so what went wrong?

The subconscious mind mistook the fifth 3-Bet of the session for a threat as urgent as the Ecuadorian mugger. The emergency process chose the FIGHT response as most appropriate and sent a message to the central computer that immediate action was required. The computer rogered that and injected high levels of adrenaline into the

bloodstream. The student was powerless to prevent the actions of his rogue defence mechanism, which had so badly misinterpreted how quickly action was required and how serious the threat was to his chances of surviving. Once again, the root of the problem can be traced back to faulty interpretation. The all-in button was the correct one given the interpretation of the situation and so the act of shoving is the symptom, not the cause.

**Poker is an alien world because there are no occasions where emotionally propelled action is immediately required.**

## Pattern Recognition

In life, things that look like trees are almost always trees. How often have you seen an impostor tree that looks just like one until you get close enough to discover that it's actually a different object altogether? It is no wonder then that we have grown up to accept external reality at face value. If we went around closely inspecting apples to make sure that they were really apples before taking a bite, we would waste much time and effort.

Unfortunately, poker can be a minefield of spots, which look like something familiar and then turn out to be something entirely different. There was a hidden factor or two that slipped under the radar, which changed the entire makeup of the situation. The beginner sees the rough shape of a pre-flop situation and his mind makes a quick identification, just like in life.

'Aha! I am in the small blind where flatting is bad so I shall fold these pocket threes.'

This is pattern recognition at work. We know apples are safe to eat and we know that flatting in the small blind is bad...except for when it's great.

The student feels fine about his line, until I explain that the big blind (BB) was a very loose recreational looking player and that calling the button's 3BB raise with 33 would, in fact, have been very profitable. This is due to the massive boost in implied odds from the BB's implied frequent presence in the pot. The student had to scan ahead on the table and look in closer detail to find this call, so why didn't he do just that? Because his mental programming tells him that trees are trees and flatting in the SB is bad. In order to find the highest EV play here, he would have had to examine the tree more closely just in case it was not a tree at all, and that clashes with how the student has been examining the external world for his whole life.

**Poker is an alien world because, in many spots, the identity of a situation is not what it strongly appears to be.**