

World Class Poker with T. J. Cloutier

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I must confess that this is the first game software of any kind I have ever owned. That statement includes poker software. Thus, I have no software to compare it against, and this led me to take it with me on a recent trip to the Department of Mathematics at Michigan Technological University. Several of the people I was visiting there have much more familiarity with poker software than I. So I wish to thank Don Kreher and David Olson for comparative insights they provided me.

There are two ways one can relate to this game. The first is as a source of entertainment; something one can sit down and play with the object of enjoying the experience. The second is to use the game as a learning tool. I'll return to these two modes shortly.

The poker varieties available in the game are five-card draw, seven-card stud, Omaha, and hold'em. None of them are available as high-low, that is, they all are offered as high only. The Omaha, 5-card draw, and 7-card stud are available only as limit ring games. Hold'em has the same limit games as well as pot limit and no-limit. One special feature of the game is a collection of written and verbal comments from T. J. Cloutier. However, these special comments are available only for no-limit hold'em. One also has the option of suppressing the comments should one desire to do so. There are three levels of difficulty for everything one does: easy, moderate, and difficult.

Tournaments are available for hold'em. The tournaments come in a variety of flavours. One option is a single table satellite tournament that may be played as limit, pot limit, or no-limit. Another option is a main event no-limit hold'em tournament with several thousand players. Another option is limit and pot-limit tournaments with hundreds of players. There is a final table mode option and a heads-up option. The latter two options are both no-limit hold'em. If you choose heads-up, you will be playing against T. J. Cloutier's avatar. If you choose the final table option, his avatar will be one of your eight opponents.

You are given a bankroll for each of the three difficulty settings. The game keeps track of your bankroll in each of the three settings. You may, of course, reset your bankroll if you run out of funds.

As far as providing an entertaining game is concerned, the game has some nice features. The graphics are very good. The avatars, against whom one plays, have excellent eye movement tuned to the action. They also are equipped with a wide variety of phrases they spit out at various times. Some of them are rather witty and I have found myself repeating a few in B&M cardrooms. One negative aspect of this, though, is the fact that some of the phrases they utter are hold'em specific, but come out even when one is playing a non-hold'em game. All three of us found the game fun to play.

How does it rate as a learning tool? It has much to offer inexperienced players. Board reading skills are developed for both hold'em and Omaha by a clear statement of each of the remaining players' hands at the showdown. Anyone trying the multi-table tournaments will learn about blind structures, filling tables, and moving players to balance tables. I believe it would help players with little or no tournament experience to fit in more quickly at real tournaments.

The real value for inexperienced players from any poker software is how much it helps them develop strategic skills. Cloutier's playing tips are valuable. A discussion about various hands is available as a basic tool. His tips also are available in the midst of playing no-limit hands. There are both preflop tips and postflop tips. His tips offer good basic playing advice. However, it must be pointed out that the tips begin to lose their value in tournaments as conditions change. In other words, they are level one tips in that position and relative stack sizes make drastic differences in what a player can do. Of course, it is too much to expect packaged advice to be able to make that kind of adjustment.

My basic message is that anyone who cannot beat this game should not be playing for real money. I'm not claiming it is easy. A new player may have trouble at first. The AI players will check-raise you and run bluffs. However, they play too loosely overall and give in to aggression more easily than most players you'll encounter in the real world. As far as tournaments go, many of the AI players wait too long before they push their stacks, thereby getting blinded down to inconsequential stacks. However, some of the AI players handle short stacks well.

The replay feature is very nice. It allows a player to watch a hand as if it were on TV; all the hands are face up as the betting is replayed, with little comment boxes to show what each player needs, etc. You can replay a hand immediately, if you want to see whether you were bluffed out, or you can replay an entire tournament, if so inclined.

My main complaint about the design is the visual display of the action. The size of the pot is prominently displayed, but the only way to tell how much each player has bet and who has raised is to examine the stacks of chips in front of the active players. It would be most helpful if there were an option to display numerical amounts for the stacks, and an option to continue to display whether a player had checked, bet/raised, or called.