A Comedy of Errors - Light!

Crushing SNGs by Exploiting your Opponents Mistakes

We all know where the money comes from in Poker right? It comes from your opponents mistakes! Fortunately there is one area of poker where there are simply more opportunities to make mistakes than any other… Low buy-in Sit and Go Tournaments.

This eBook will go through the stages of a SNG highlighting common errors that your opponents will make time and time again… In order to turn these errors into $$$ in the bank each section will contain an effective counter-strategy. In no time at all you will be crushing SNGs, clearing bonuses and cashing out again and again!!

This book assumes some familiarity with SNGs – if you are new to this area I suggest taking a look at the structure over at Full Tilt Poker first. You can use 'play money' until you are confident enough to make a deposit – as an introduction you can get a bonus matching your first deposit up to $600 when you use our exclusive bonus code **PPUK01**

We suggest that you read the entire guide before implementing any individual strategies. The key concepts which link all of the sections are Fold Equity (having enough chips to threaten your opponent with elimination – or at least major stack damage) and correct Bubble play (the part of the SNG where the next person out does not get paid).

This version of "A Comedy of Errors" is the light or preview version. To get the full version with additional chapters on reading hands / players, Unexploitable Heads-Up play, a primer on ICM and Common Trap Hands visit the Plan3t Gong Poker Blog Today at http://plan3tgongpoker.blogspot.com

- ✓ The Early Stages: Why 'Tight is Right but Tighter is Righter'
- ✓ Middle Stages: Opening up and Stealing Blinds
- ✓ The Bubble: Why the bubble is the most important part of a SNG.
- ✓ In The Money: Now its Time to go for 1st
- ✓ (Full Version Only) Heads Up Play: Unexploitable HU Strategy and when *not* to use it!
- ✓ (Full Version Only) An Introduction to the Independent Chip Model (ICM) and how this can seriously improve your results
- ✓ (Full Version Only) Reading the Table and Individuals
- ✓ (Full Version Only) Common 'Trap Hands' and how to play them
- ✓ Software Tools to further Improve Your Game
- ✓ Bankroll Management and the importance of Bonus clearing

The Early Stages

Ok, so you have sat down in a $10+1 SNG at your regular poker site, the blinds are tiny compared to the starting stacks and the usual collection of novice players have sat down with you. What do you look out for? Here is a quick summary of the most common early game errors… we will look at each one in more detail below and then look at the counter-strategy.

➢ Playing too many hands, especially out of position.
➢ Cold Calling Raises in Multi-way pots
➢ Post-Flop Play; Calling too much and Bluffing too much.
➢ Bet Size errors, Pot Control and Pot Odds.

o **Playing too many hands, especially out of position…**

In an average SNG your opponents will be playing a lot of hands, some as many as 40% of all hands dealt. This means that the flop will be seen by anywhere between 3 and 5 players on average. Their logic is that it is cheap to see the flop and potentially hit a monster. While this can happen the risks taken do not equal the chips gained! Let us look at a couple of examples.

Example 1; You are first to act on the very first hand of a SNG, you are dealt two black 10's – not a bad starting hand but not a great one. You decide to raise 3 times the big blind to 60, everyone has 1500 chips to start…here is what happens.
- 3rd to act is Clive the Calling Station, he has KJ of hearts and calls because they are 'Sooted'
- Fred the Fish in 5th Position has 44 and calls, the first 2 might be bluffing!
- Aggressive Andy is 6th and calls with 78 suited; he read in a book that suited connectors are good hands…
- The button has A6 off-suit but is getting 4/1 on his call and has position so calls too.
- The Big Blind has the mediocre Q9 off-suit, however he only has to put in 40 chips into a pot of 250 so makes the call.

The question is - what flop do you want to see here? Any over-cards, connected cards (especially high ones) and suited cards have to be a worry. Of course 1 time in 7.5 you will flop a 3rd 10… but hang on, what if there is another high card or even 2, can you be sure that someone did not flop a straight?

Example 2; Fred Fish has A7 of Hearts in middle position, there are 2 limps ahead and he also limps as does the button, not the Big Blind raises to 60 (3* the Big Blind) and the limpers ahead call, the pot odds (200 in the pot 40 to call = 5/1) are huge so Fred calls, button calls behind. The flop is 4A6 with 3 different suits… it is checked to Fred. The question is what to do?? Is his Ace good? Almost never!! But people play these Ace-Rag hands again and again!!
There are circumstances where it makes sense to speculate early. First let us be clear about why playing too many hands early will lose money long-term. Sure you will get the

occasional double up, but most of the time you will not! Most of the time, say 3 out of every 4 SNGs played, the people using this logic will find themselves with small stacks in the later stages… as you will see later in this guide, this is not just a problem – it is a disaster!!! The mid to late stages rely on an important concept – Fold Equity, if someone gives this up in an attempt to double early they will end up losing money!

The effective counter strategy is 'tight is right, tighter is righter' here. Play only premium hands in the early levels, either fold 1010 under the gun or raise enough to cut down the field to a single opponent, fold AJs in middle position; fold AK if there is a raise and a re-raise ahead. If you want to enter a pot then it should mostly be with a raise… if your hand is not good enough to raise it is not good enough to play. Let the fish knock themselves out with A7 and KJ suited – be patient enough to maintain your stack for the middle stages – you will end up cashing more and more often.

There are some exceptions, situations where it can be correct to play a below-average hand in the early stages. It is important here that you have the discipline to fold after the flop when you miss – bluffing is never a good strategy early in a low-level SNG!

The kind of hands I refer to are medium to low pairs and high suited connectors (910s+) in position (very important that you are last or almost last to act as it minimizes the risk of being raised out of the hand pre-flop and also gives you an opportunity to see your opponents act before you make a decision after the flop). Small pairs are great on the button when there are limpers ahead – go ahead and limp behind, if you hit a set then bingo! Time for a double up… if not then the hand is easy to ditch on the flop. Be more careful with the suited connectors – top pair is not good enough to play a big pot. If you hit the flop hard (2 pair or a combo straight and flush draw) by all means bet, if not then keep that pot small…

   o **Cold Calling Raises in Multi-Way Pots.**

This is a horrible play that you will see often in SNGs. Someone raises 3 or 4 times the Big Blind and – boom – 4 people call. The question to ask here is 'with what hands would it be correct to cold-call a raise in a multi-way pot?'
- Small / medium pairs might fit the bill, but then again if the raise is more than 20% of your (or biggest stacked opponents) stack then this is a negative expectation play – remember you not only need to make the set but to get all of someone's chips too… not going to happen every time, in fact the rule of thumb to use here is make sure you have 12 to 1 odds from at least one opponent (do not count with 2 opponents stacks together as it is very rare to stack 2 people at once!).
- What about the Ace hands… AK / AQ / AJ / A10 or even lower. Well you will hit the flop 1 in 3 times with one card (assuming no-one is sharing your outs) but how do you know if your hand is good? There could be a higher ace out there, 2 pairs, trips or a number of draws… its going to cost you money to find out.
- Maybe suited connectors or high cards, again dangerous – you simply can not expect to make a profit on such a call enough times to make it worthwhile – say you flop a flush – even the greenest novice is going to stop putting money into the pot with 3 suited cards on the board!

It comes down to maintaining your Fold Equity for the all important bubble once again. The strategy to follow here is simple, do not over-call a raise in a multi-way pot – either fold your AQo or re-raise that pair of Kings strongly enough to take the pot or get heads up with a single opponent. With say 600 chips in the pot you should be trying to win it right away – too many people try and get fancy hoping to extract more – don't do it!!

o **Post-Flop Play: Calling too much and Bluffing too much.**

So we know that low level SNG players enter too many pots with too many hands without proper regard for position… but what about after the flop? Well if Clive Calling station entered a pot with A7 Suited and the flop comes 2 6 A you can be sure of one thing – he is not folding!! This creates some good opportunities and some hazards, and also re-enforces the point that it is correct to play super-tight early. If you are holding Ace King here the solution is easy, value-bet, build the pot and take the guys stack. But say you have a pair of Queens? We suggest making a good size (2/3rds of the pot) Continuation bet here, but when you are called you must give up the hand, do not bet bigger on the turn hoping that someone will suddenly decide their kicker is too low… its just not going to happen!! An Ace on the flop in a low level SNG is the end of your high pair – simple.

Now we can have a look at the reverse situation, someone raises pre flop with their Q10 suited and misses… in a low level SNG you will see them bet and bet and bet to try and take a pot. One thing to look out for is the 'string bet' that is a bet of the same size on each street, might as well just type in the chat box 'I missed please give me the pot!!', bets which double on each street are also worth looking out for, these usually indicate a weak hand – but not one which has completely missed.

The strategy in the early levels is do not bluff!! Too many people will call to the end with nothing more than Ace high (or even less). The continuation bet is another matter – you should be making a good size raise on the flop most times when you took the lead pre-flop and have been called. However if you have a missed hand and are called you must shut down immediately! Make sure you do not continuation bet into more than 2 people with a missed hand, there is just too much danger that someone caught enough on the flop to call you down.

Post flop play is too huge a subject to cover in 10 eBooks, let alone one. Think of this as an extension of the 'preserve your chips' strategy, if you are only playing premium hands in good position you should not face too many tough post flop decisions. Some of the above concepts will be expanded in the sections on 'Trap hands' and 'Reading your opponents' below.

o **Bet Size, Pot Control and Pot Odds.**

This is where things get interesting… the errors made when betting are huge, an effective counter strategy here can do huge amounts for your bankroll. Some betting 'tells' will be covered in the 'Reading Opponents' section – here we will look at the common errors and how to effectively counter them.

Firstly the min-raise, whether first into a pot or min raising limpers this move is completely crazy!! As before we need to look at what kind of hand the min-raiser could have that would justify such a move?

- A premium hand (AA / KK / QQ / AKs) why min-raise these? Anyone who would have limped is likely to call the 20 or 30 more chips. Anyone who has already limped is going to call the extra too… now there are 5 people seeing a flop – your Aces still the best hand? Maybe, but premium hands are at their best when against a single opponent pre flop for a big pot. You need to raise a good amount pre flop here, a min-raise is just asking for trouble.
- A Non-Premium Pair? No No No! The value in these hands comes from hitting a set and taking someone's whole stack. Why commit more chips than you have to pre-flop? After all there are 3 more betting rounds if you do hit, it is simply a waste of chips and thus a waste of your precious fold equity to min-raise pre flop here.
- High Cards (AQ / AJ / KQs etc)? Again no benefit of bloating the pot pre flop, the thing with these hands is it is easy to lose a big pot if you get out flopped. You should be putting in a decent sized raise, narrowing the field to a single opponent and then either taking down the pot on the flop or folding and moving on if you encounter significant resistance.
- Suited connectors? No again, your value is from flopping a hidden monster, this will not happen very often so keep things as cheap as possible pre-flop.

If you see an opponent min-raising in a low level SNG you can be pretty sure they do not know what they are doing – no hand justifies this play. The counter strategy here is simple, find out what your opponent is min-raising with and re-raise them at the appropriate moment. They will often fold but if they choose to play a big pot with that pair of 6's pre flop then we are happy to oblige…

Pot Control is the concept of adjusting your bet / raise sizes to create the right size of pot for your hand. Obviously with a monster you want to create a large a pot as possible, most opponents will do this (see 'Reading your opponents' section for a note on slowplayers). The error that your opponents make is usually in the other direction; they play a big pot, often out of position, with an average hand. Going back to the example earlier of the guy with A7s – people will raise and re-raise here! Now think about the hands this guys opponent could have, a better ace, trips, 2 pair etc etc – why build a pot with a medium strength hand, your objective if you find yourself in this situation should be to get to showdown as cheaply as possible.

A related concept is the bet after all the cards are out that has no chance of winning any money. Here is an example, you have 10 10 and get to the river against a single opponent with the board reading 8 6 5 9 J the last 2 cards put a total of 3 spades on the board. You are in position and have been betting each street your opponent checks to you on the river. Should you bet again? No! The reason is simple, you will only ever be called by a better hand in this situation, is your opponent has a flush, straight, trips or maybe even AJ he will call – or probably raise – if you have him beaten the likelihood is of a fold. Learning to spot these situations will save you many chips over time and chips at the table soon translate into $$$ in the bank!!

Finally for this section we will look at pot odds errors. The concept is this, if the odds you are getting from the pot are better than the chances of your hand improving on the next card you should be inclined to call. If the odds are worse than your chances of improving you should be inclined to fold. Do not forget about implied odds here - the extra bets you might win on future betting rounds if you do make your hand. For now we will look at common errors in early play.

- Chasing draws against the odds. The amount of times people will call huge bets with 4 cards to a flush and one card to come is horrible!! Think about it, the flush will be made approximately 1 in 4 times, if someone takes 2/1 odds on a 4/1 chance enough times then they will go broke very quickly! Put another way for every time this opponent makes his flush and doubles his stack he will lose his stack 3 times… can be frustrating when someone outdraws you in this manner, learn to be happy about it – this is where your $$$ are coming from!
- Giving odds to drawing hands. Here is the reverse, there are 1000 chips in the pot on the turn and 3 spades out, Frank Fish with his pair of jacks wants to extract more value from his hand and bets 200… Now the opponent holding the ace of spades and queen of hearts has 13 outs, he will make a winning hand more than 1 in 4 times and is being offered 6/1 odds on that possibility – over time his call will make chips even without the possibility of more bets on the river. The counter strategy is clear, if you suspect an opponent has a draw you must bet enough so they are making a mistake by calling, whether or not they call and hit this time their call will lose money over time!

The Middle Stages

The middle stages of SNG tournaments provide even more opportunity for an unskilled opponent to make mistakes. This stage can be described as when the blinds reach 10 to 15% of your stack. The mistakes made here are due to adjusting, or rather not adjusting, to the new circumstances, less players and higher blinds. As you will see below there are 4 key aspects to middle stage play, loosening your raising requirements, tightening your calling requirements, stealing blinds (which also includes the lucrative re-steals!) and finally stack size awareness.

By this stage you hopefully have at least some reads on the table and individual players. If not then please read the 'Reads' section of this eBook.

We will look at the raising and calling changes together, assume 6 or 7 players remain and the blinds are now 100 with the average stack up to 1300. What does this mean for raising requirements?? Well we can start with pairs, at a full table there is a reasonable chance that one or more opponents wake up with a nice high pair, lets put it at 20% for the purposes of illustration… at a full table your pair of 8's in Early position may be playable for set value here, be careful though you would not want a raise pre flop and 2 over cards on the flop! Let us look at a 6 handed table instead, well 60% of the 20% chance means just 12% to work with. Now there is an improved chance that your 8's are the best hand. You need to reduce the requirements for raising a pot to account for the reduced players, the chances are reasonable (read dependant!) that you pick up the blinds with each raise… when this is 10% or more of your stack then consider it a success!

The main thing your opponents misunderstand in the middle stages is that the 'gap' concept has become more important. You need a bigger hand to call a raise than to raise yourself at all stages of a sit and go – as you go through the middle stages towards the bubble this becomes more important. There are two reasons for this, both are important and both illustrate why you need to be the raiser and not the caller!

Let us look at it from the perspective of taking the initiative. Fred fish raises in early position (short handed which equals middle position at a full table) for 3* the BB or 300 chips, both of your stacks are equal at 1200 and you are in the BB with 88. You put Fred's range as any Ace, Any Pair or any 2 cards 10 or above and call the raise… seems reasonable at the time – you have around 50% equity against Fred's range. But hang on, assuming you do not hit trips on the flop what are you going to do next? Leading out with a bet could work, but here is the rub – what hands that Fred calls with are you beating, say on a 2 over card flop? You could check and see what Fred does – but surely he continuation bets into one opponent with his entire range – now what, you have to pay up to half of your remaining stack to see if he fires again on the turn… no thanks!

The key to middle stage play is to be the raiser and not the caller. In fact you would not go far wrong never cold calling a raise once the raise is 10% or more of your stack, if your hand is not good enough to re-raise then why not throw it away. See the section on common trap hands for some exceptions to this! In the example above you should be thinking about what percentage of his range would Fred fold to an all in re-raise, not about calling.

The mistake that most people make is not understanding that certain hands fall in value as the blinds go up. These are small pairs, suited connectors, and suited aces that rely heavily on implied odds to win the chips. They will not hit trips / flushes etc very often but the reward is big when they do. Once the blinds get to 15% of your stack throw these cards away… the maths just does not work, here is an example.

You have 1200 chips on the button, BB= 100, someone from EP with the same stack raises to 300 and you call with 66. The Blinds fold so the pot is now 750. Here is what happens if we replay 100 times.

> 14 times you hit the 6!
> - 10 of these (being generous) you manage to get your opponents entire stack
> - The other 4 times you take the pot as it is
> 86 times you miss and fold you your opponents continuation bet.

So the numbers looks like this:

10	* +	1650	=	+ 16500
4	* +	450	=	+ 1800
86	* -	300	=	- 25800

Put it another way – each time you make this play you lose, on average, 15% of your stack!!!

So, the correct counter strategy in the middle stages is to loosen your raising requirements and tighten your calling requirements. This should allow you to take

enough blinds to maintain a healthy stack while not taking too many risks with your own chips. Some opponents will play too tight as the blinds increase – look out for them and raise their blinds with lesser hands, be prepared to fold to re-raises though, when a tighty raises it is time to quietly exit the hand and move on!

Everyone's chips come from somewhere on a poker table. The average low level SNG player will not take stack sizes into account when deciding their play. You should do this, particularly when it comes to picking up blinds. Try to avoid the big stacks – it is cheap for them to call – and the small stacks, who might just take King-high and make their final stand. The people to steal from are the medium stacks at the table; they are comfortable enough not to need to take risks without good hands and will give up their blinds more easily.

You also need to note your position relative to the other stacks. If the big stack acts directly after you then stealing from others at the table will be very difficult. In this case you should consider reducing the blind steal attempts and instead re-stealing from one of the medium stacks when you are in the blinds. This has to have a balance – if you re-raise all in each time someone raises your blind you will be called fairly soon, if you never defend your blind then it will be taken each round leaving you short-stacked. The occasional re-steal will cure this problem, remember not to do this with hands that can be easily dominated – Ace-rag should never be used for a re-steal and small pairs are dangerous here (the hands that might call you are often overpairs or aces with decent kickers – other hands are more likely to be folded). High suited connectors, mid-pairs (99+) and AJ+ are all candidates here.

The Bubble

It has been calculated that up to 65% of a players profitability in SNGs comes from Bubble play, more than any other part of the game you need to be aware of your opponent's errors and capitalize on them.

The first error that many players make is to misunderstand the true nature of the payout structure… most SNGs pay 50% for 1st, 30% for 2nd and 20% for 3rd. So at the bubble it makes sense to play for 1st right?? WRONG!!! Look at those numbers again; the jump from 4th (0%) to 3rd (20%) is exactly the same size as the jump from 2nd to 1st!!! This actually makes a huge difference to the optimum strategy – forget playing for 1st and start to think of the bubble as the place to maximize your equity in the prize pool, to do this you need to cash first and *then* think about going for the 1st place.

The section on ICM (The independent chip model) will look into maximizing your equity in the prize pool in more detail and will also show exactly why you must fold many hands at the bubble even when you are fairly sure you are ahead of your opponents range. ICM will add $$$ to your bankroll, but first lets understand some common errors and how to exploit them!!

Those errors are; Not understanding push / fold strategy and why the post-flop poker is over, playing too tight, calling too loose, and not taking proper account of stack sizes and position.

The example I will use is this; 4 players remain, a big-stack with 5000 chips, 2 middle stacks with 2000 chips and a small stack with 1000. The blinds are 300/150 with no ante as yet. You are one of the middle stacks and pick up 10 K , the small stack folds UTG and the big stack folds on the button you are next to act in the SB what is your line?

Without any doubt you should be pushing here, the other medium stack can not profitably call without a top 2% hand – even if he knows what you have!! To be clear we can look at the alternatives:
- Raise 3* BB to 900, well if the other guy pushes you are now getting 2/1 on the call and should probably call the all in based on pot odds alone.
- Raise 2* BB to 600, ok, he calls (getting 3/1 after all) and you miss the flop – now what? Or you hit 2nd pair but an Ace also falls – what do you do?

The reason you push is to maximize your fold equity, it is what you have been carefully preserving those chips for throughout the game! The other guy can not call, not because he 'respects your raise' but because the risk of busting out in 4th makes the call unprofitable – why take a coin flip with a small stack in the BB for 30% of his stack next hand.

A common error is that people will take these chances, think about what happens if he calls with say 88, you have a coin flip and one of you will bust. But who really benefits? The small stack does!!! His precarious situation meant that in real terms he was holding 5% of the prize pool at the moment the medium stacks went to war… afterwards he is guaranteed to hold 20% whoever wins the hand, nice result!

To counteract people calling too light on the bubble you need to make an accurate assessment of their likely calling range. By doing this you can work out which hands can be profitably pushed. By factoring in stack sizes and aligning this with equity in the prize pool you have a powerful edge on your opponents! This is difficult on paper – our suggestion is that you invest in one of the available software tools that do this for you. These are detailed in the 'Tools' section below.

In the above example the big stack actually made a common mistake, with the small stack not in the hand he could have profitably raised any 2 cards. This would threaten both of the other stacks with elimination if they called and lost – a big risk for 20% of the prize pool. Be aware of stack sizes, if you are a big stack it can sometimes be worth keeping the small stack alive just to exploit the fact that the other stacks can not easily call you!

The biggest mistake at the bubble is to call with easily dominated hands, never call with Ace-rag or a tiny pair and you will not go far wrong. Make sure that you get maximum fold equity by pushing, especially when a raise and a continuation bet will leave you pot committed (that is the pot would be more than your remaining stack). Do not raise a stack that can easily call you (2* your chips or more) without a good starting hand.

In The Money Play

Great, you made it to the money; a collective sigh of relief comes from the table. Now it is time to go for first!! In the money play appears on the surface to be the same as bubble play. There are many similarities including push / fold being the optimum strategy (assuming our stacks are less than 10 big blinds), plus stack sizes and position are still vitally important. The major difference is the change in calling requirements from the previously tight players.

On the bubble a tight player is a goldmine, the error the same person will often make is to push an average hand as soon as the bubble bursts in a desperate bid to double up. Be aware of who these people are and call them down lighter (but remember – no calling with easily dominated hands!!).

Big stacks do not have the same amount of fold equity in the money. Be aware of this if your stack is large, people who folded to your raises for the last 20 hands are now likely to play for their entire stack with something decidedly average.

Software Tools to Improve your Game.

This section reviews some of the many software tools available, for a small investment it is possible to significantly improve your play! If we look at these in terms of opponent's errors then the edge you are gaining is clear – you are analyzing hands to find leaks – your opponents are not. You are understanding correct bubble play – your opponents are not. You are calculating equity for hands against a typical range for an opponent – your opponents are guessing. For the price of a few buy-ins you get an edge that translates into real profit from the tables – win 3 SNGs that you would have lost otherwise and you suddenly show a profit on your investment!

1. Poker Office

Pokeroffice is a multi-function application that can benefit cash game and tournament players alike. Its main functions can be divided into 'real-time' and 'historical'. Pokeroffice can display statistics on your opponents while you play. These can include the % of hands played; post-flop aggression ratings and the % of hands played that are eventually taken to showdown. This is a great help to decision making at the table – for example there would be little point bluffing into someone who took 90% of their hands to showdown! Historical data takes the form of a database of every hand that you play. This can be configured to show which hands win and lose you the most money, a great way of identifying leaks in your game. There are also some nice charting functions associated with this tool. Pokeroffice costs $79, click the link below for more information!

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