

# Optimal Play for a Non-Ergodic Card Game

Mees van Dartel, Lorenzo Gregoris

September 17, 2025

## 1 Problem formulation

Consider the following card game <sup>1</sup>. A decision maker faces a deck  $\mathcal{D} = \{x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n\}$  containing  $n$  cards, labeled  $i \in \{1, 2, \dots, n\}$ . The value of card  $x_i = i$ . At every time step, the decision maker draws from the deck with uniform probability without replacement. Denote by  $D_t$  the set of remaining cards in the deck at time  $t$ . The probability of drawing a card  $x_i$ , conditional on the remaining cards  $D_t$ , is given by the following PMF:

$$\mathbb{P}(X = x_i \mid D_t) = \begin{cases} \frac{1}{|D_t|} & \text{for } x_i \in D_t \\ 0 & \text{else} \end{cases}. \quad (1)$$

Let  $x_t$  be the card drawn at time  $t$ . The decision maker sequentially draws cards, and faces the following choice. She can *pick* the drawn card  $x_t$ , and receive reward  $r_t = x_t$ . However, she must thereafter draw and discard  $x_t$  cards from the deck, such that:

$$D_{t+1} \mid \text{Pick} = D_t \setminus \{y_1, y_2, \dots, y_{x_t}, x_t\}, \quad (2)$$

where  $y_j$  is drawn uniformly at random without replacement  $y_j \sim U(D_t \setminus \{y_1, \dots, y_{j-1}\})$ . Alternatively, she can choose to *skip* the card, whereafter she receives reward  $r_t = 0$ , and can draw a new card: We then have:

$$D_{t+1} \mid \text{Skip} = D_t \setminus \{x_t\}. \quad (3)$$

The decision maker's information set at time  $t$  is given by  $\Omega_t = \{\mathcal{D}, D_t\}$ , such that she can observe which cards are left in the deck. At  $t = 0$ , we have  $D_0 = \mathcal{D}$ . The decision maker's objective is to maximize her total expected sum of rewards:

$$R = \mathbb{E} \left[ \sum_{t=0}^{\infty} r_t \right]. \quad (4)$$

Whenever a time step  $\tau$  occurs where there are no cards remaining, such that  $D_\tau = \emptyset$ , all subsequent rewards are 0, i.e.,  $r_t = 0$  for all  $t \geq \tau$ .  $D_\tau$  is an absorbing state.  $D_\tau$  eventually occurs with  $\mathbb{P} = 1$ , at the latest at  $t = n$ , if the decision maker never picks any card. This is clearly suboptimal, as her total sum of rewards will be  $R = 0$ . She can easily improve upon this with the following policy:

$$\pi(x_t, D_t) = \begin{cases} \text{Pick} & \text{if } x_t = n \\ \text{Skip} & \text{if } x_t \neq n \end{cases}, \quad (5)$$

---

<sup>1</sup>Of course single player games are not games in the formal sense.

such that her total sum of rewards is  $R = n$ .

**THIS IS A NON-HOMOGENOUS, NON-ERGODIC MARKOV CHAIN? WHAT IS THE STRUCTURE, WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT THE OPTIMAL POLICY?**

## 2 Optimal play

Consider the following policy:

$$\pi^{\max}(x_t, D_t) = \begin{cases} \text{Pick} & \text{if } x_t = \max\{D_t\} \\ \text{Skip} & \text{if } x_t \neq \max\{D_t\} \end{cases}, \quad (6)$$

The policy  $\pi^s$  simply searches for the largest card remaining in the deck and ends the game. Once this policy chooses *pick*, we enter the absorbing state  $D_\tau$ , ending the game. For any state  $D_t$ , the value of this policy is given by:

$$V^{\pi^s}(x_t, D_t) = \sum_t^\infty r_t = \max\{D_t\}, \quad (7)$$

We can think of an example of a deck  $D^s$  for which the following policy is optimal, namely a deck for which, for every  $x_i \in D^s, x_i > |D^s|$ . Picking any card from  $D^s$  will generate the absorbing state  $D_\tau$ , ending the game, so clearly it is optimal to search for the largest card in the deck and end the game.

Our proposition for the optimal policy is as follows:

**Proposition 2.1.** *The optimal policy for the card game is given by:*

$$\pi^m(x_t, D_t) = \arg \max_{a \in \{\text{Pick}, \text{Skip}\}} \left\{ r(x_t, a) + \mathbb{E} \left[ V^{\pi^s}(x_{t+1}, D_{t+1}) \right] \right\}. \quad (8)$$

*Proof.* The Bellman equation for the card game is given by:

$$V(x_t, D_t) = \max_{a \in \{\text{Pick}, \text{Skip}\}} \left\{ r(x_t, a) + \mathbb{E} \left[ V(x_{t+1}, D_{t+1}) \right] \right\}. \quad (9)$$

It follows that if we can show that

$$\arg \max_{a \in \{\text{Pick}, \text{Skip}\}} \left\{ r(x_t, a) + \mathbb{E} \left[ V(x_{t+1}, D_{t+1}) \right] \right\} = \arg \max_{a \in \{\text{Pick}, \text{Skip}\}} \left\{ r(x_t, a) + \mathbb{E} \left[ V^{\pi^{\max}}(x_{t+1}, D_{t+1}) \right] \right\}, \quad (10)$$

then we can be sure that our policy is the optimal policy:

$$\pi^m(x_t, D_t) = \pi^*(x_t, D_t). \quad (11)$$

We can rewrite the RHS as:

$$r(x_t, a) + \mathbb{E} \left[ V^{\pi^{\max}}(x_{t+1}, D_{t+1}) \right] = r(x_t, a) + \mathbb{E} \left[ \max\{D_{t+1}\} \right]. \quad (12)$$

We can order the elements of  $D_t$  as  $m_1 > m_2 > \dots > m_{|D_t|}$ , where  $\max\{D_t\} = m_1$ . Note that the total number of ways we can discard  $x_t$  cards from a deck of size  $|D_t|$  is given by

$$\binom{|D_t| - 1}{x_t}. \quad (13)$$

We are interested in the number of outcomes for which  $\max\{D_t\} = m_j$ . These are all events where all cards  $m_i > m_j$  are discarded, and  $m_j$  is not discarded. The number of events such that these conditions hold is given by

$$\binom{|D_t| - 1 - j}{x_t - (j - 1)}, \quad (14)$$

since we can randomize over  $x_t - (j - 1)$  cards (the cards smaller than  $m_j$ ), and can draw them from  $|D_t| - j$  cards. It follows that:

$$\mathbb{P}\left(\max\{D_{T+1}\} = m_j \mid \text{Pick } x_t\right) = \mathbb{P}_j = \frac{\binom{|D_t| - 1}{x_t}}{\binom{|D_t| - j - 1}{x_t - (j - 1)}}. \quad (15)$$

We can then expand the expected maximum after picking  $x_t$  as:

$$\mathbb{E}[\max\{D_{t+1}\} \mid \text{Pick}, x_t] = \sum_{j=1}^{x_t} \mathbb{P}_j \cdot m_j = \sum_{j=1}^{x_t} \frac{\binom{|D_t| - 1}{x_t}}{\binom{|D_t| - j - 1}{x_t - (j - 1)}} m_j. \quad (16)$$

It follows that the decision maker should select action *Pick* iff:

$$x_t + \sum_{j=1}^{x_t} \frac{\binom{|D_t| - 1}{x_t}}{\binom{|D_t| - j - 1}{x_t - (j - 1)}} m_j > m_1. \quad (17)$$

**TO BE CONTINUED**

□