

Bluff: Frequently Asked Questions

Why is the game called Bluff?

It is the first casino table game in which the strategies for the player and dealer involve bluffing. This allows the game to have the feel of real poker, with fairness and symmetry between player and dealer.

Why is this game faster than other poker-like games?

It is played from a shoe, uses the fewest possible cards per hand so the shoe lasts for longer before shuffling, and has fewer rounds of betting and card drawing.

What equipment does this game need?

- A) Casino gaming table with chip rack
- B) Bluff proprietary table felt (5, 6, or 7 player positions)
- C) Card shoe or continuous shuffling machine
- D) Discard rack
- E) 2 to 8 standard 52-card decks
- F) Optional: Progressive betting system plus tracking buttons

What is the best player strategy?

Although the dealer only bluffs on 2 and 3, the player should bluff on 2, 3, and 4 (by placing a "Raise" bet) to maximize his chances. With 5, 6, 7, and 8, placing a "Call" bet and placing no 2nd bet are equally good. With 9 through Ace, placing a "Raise" bet or a "Call" bet are equally good.

How many decisions must the player make?

In the current version, the player makes a single 3-way choice at the start: Raise, Call, or Fold. It should be understood that "Calling" or "Folding" actually occur only if the dealer Raises; if the dealer Checks, the Ante bet is at stake and is not folded while the Call bet, if made, is out of play and is pushed. References below to the player "Checking" mean that he is not making the Raise bet, but may be either Calling or Folding to a dealer Raise.

What is the House Edge?

Without card counting, about 4.2% of the unit wager. Expert card counting can lower this to about 2.5% but even the simple count of 23 vs 9TJQKA can get it down to 3.1%.

Are the side bets independent of the main game?

Yes. The player must play the main game to play the optional side bets, but they are not affected by his decisions. The "Suit and Tie" side bet pays up to 15 to 1 and the wager is not limited by the size of the main game wager. If a Suit and Tie Progressive Jackpot is offered, the bet will be a fixed dollar amount.

Can the House Edge be changed?

For the side bets, a variety of pay tables can be offered with different House Edges. For the main game, the House Edge can be protected from card counting by using a continuous shuffler. The House Edge can be raised by only having the dealer fold on half the 6's rather than all of them (determined by suit). If the dealer folds on Red 6 and calls on Black 6, the House Edge increases to 4.8%, and the optimal player strategy changes slightly (the player should check on 4 rather than bluff).

Other variations, where the player and/or dealer can reraise, have also been developed, with a variety of House Edges. These variations, involving multiple rounds of betting, require specially printed card decks and a hole card reader, unlike the main version of the game which can be played with regular decks.

Is it OK for players to share information and collaborate?

Yes, the extra information this provides has a very small impact on the House Edge but allows the players to experience camaraderie. If a player is Checking, it is likely that the cards the other players hold will affect his decision to Call or Fold, and if he has a high card, it has some chance of affecting the decision whether to Raise or Check.

Do the players have to handle the cards?

No, the game can be played with all player cards dealt face up and the players signaling to the dealer what to do. "Face down" provides a more poker-like experience and removes any player worries that the dealer might be unfairly using a strategy that depends on knowing the player's card, but if the dealer rules are clearly indicated on the table then "Face up" works fine too. In the "Face up" variation the house edge is slightly lower as mentioned above. For example, with 6 decks and 6 players, the House Edge of 4.23% can be reduced to 4.05% if players adopt the following strategy: "Bluff on 2-4. If no 2s or 3s are visible, Call on 5-A, otherwise Fold on 5-8 and Raise on 9-A." (Card counting as described below can get it down to 4.04%.)

Does the dealer need to keep a poker face?

No, he doesn't. In the current version of the game, all player decisions are made before the dealer sees his card. He is free to offer advice or to prompt the players in an entertaining way, but players should be aware that he does not know what his card is and has no free will about how he plays and bets.

Why are there so many betting circles?

This makes it easier for the dealer to confirm that the call and raise bets are equal in size to the ante bet, and to distinguish between players who raised and players who called because those are treated differently by the dealer.

Does the Progressive side bet really involve multiple consecutive deals?

Yes, but only 2 or 3. There is a small payout for matching the dealer in both suit and rank on the first hand, and the bet is lost if there is no match. The dealer places a button on the chip to keep track that it is a winner so there can be a large payout for the second consecutive match, and an additional button after 2 matches if the progressive is the 3-deal version that offers a super jackpot for 3 matches in a row.

It's also possible to make this a single-deal bet with fixed odds (55 to 1 for 6 or 8 decks, 60 to 1 for 4 decks, 90 to 1 for 2 decks).

Does the Progressive require special equipment?

Only if it is played with a progressively growing jackpot. If a system to manage progressive bets is not available, this bet can still be played by using a fixed top jackpot amount rather than an accumulating one. Either way, the dealer will need a supply of buttons to keep track of which players have matched the dealer already on the previous 1 or 2 hands, otherwise this must be played as a single-deal bet.

The Suit and Tie side bet wins 15 on a perfect match, wins 3 on the three cards that match in rank only, wins 1 on the 12 cards that match in suit only, and loses 1 on the other 36 cards. But $15 \times 1 + 3 \times 3 + 1 \times 12 - 1 \times 36 = 0$, so where does the House Edge come from?

The player can't reuse the dealer's card, so the chance of a perfect match is less. For example, with 6 decks, there is 1 less payout of 15 to 1 for a perfect match because of the dealer's own card, and these 15 units spread across a 6 deck shoe amount to a House Edge of about 4.8%.

Where does the House Edge in the main game come from? Does the player lose some of his bet if there is a tie?

No, this isn't Casino War.

Does the player win less than his full amount wagered if the dealer doesn't have a qualifying hand?

No, this isn't Three Card Poker.

Does the player need to make a blind side bet with bad odds?

No, unlike Ultimate Texas Hold'Em, all side bets against a pay table are optional.

Does the dealer get an extra card or extra chances?

No, this isn't Four Card Poker.

Is a commission taken out of the player's winnings?

No, this isn't Baccarat or Poker Room Poker.

I'm baffled, then – WHY DOES THE DEALER HAVE AN ADVANTAGE?

This is a very subtle point. Depending on the particular variety of poker being played, sometimes the first player has an advantage due to initiative, and sometimes the second player has an advantage due to information. With these specific rules, information is more important, so the dealer has the advantage, but it is PURELY POSITIONAL. Poker players are aware that order of play matters, but, because they are used to the "button" rotating around the poker table to identify who is dealing, they aren't concerned about it because it evens out. It doesn't even out here.

What "information" do you mean?

Although the dealer bluffs much less often than the player does (if the player is playing well, he bluffs on about 3/13 of the hands while the dealer only bluffs on about 1/21 of the hands), they are much more

powerful bluffs because they only occur when the player is checking, usually with middle-value cards. Bluffing doesn't help as much against high and low cards.

Another way of understanding the dealer advantage is to imagine the player copying the dealer's strategy. In most cases there is symmetry, but there are 4 cases (player 2-3 vs dealer 2-3) where the player wins either way, and 12 cases (one side has 9-A, the other 2 or 3) where the dealer wins 2 with the high side (calling the player's bluff) but the player only wins 1 with the high side (dealer folds to player raise). The latter are more numerous giving the House an edge; the player can reduce that a little by bluffing on 4 instead, taking advantage of knowing the dealer's strategy.

How can card counting help?

If the shoe has relatively higher proportion of the 2s and 3s remaining compared to the proportion of the 9s through Aces that remain, players should call when raised. If the shoe has relatively more 9s through Aces compared with 2s and 3s, it is best to fold with 8 or less if raised. The count for this is "-3 when a 2 or 3 comes out and +1 when a 9-A comes out": a negative total means fold 8 or less.

If the shoe has more 2s and 3s than 7s and 8s, it's better to check with 9 through Ace and call if raised. If the shoe has more 7s and 8s than 2s and 3s, it's better to raise with 9 through Ace. The count for this is "-1 when 2 or 3 comes out, +1 when 7 or 8 comes out". A positive total means check with 9-A, a negative total means raise with 9-A.

Can Bluff be played with a continuous shuffling machine?

Yes, although that removes any role for skill in keeping track of cards to make better decisions.

Can Bluff be played with a single deck?

Yes, but the "Suit and Tie" side bet doesn't work because perfect matches are no longer possible. It can be replaced with a "Black Tie" bet that pays out if the dealer and player have matching cards in clubs and spades.

My casino uses 8 decks in a shoe. Does that make a difference?

There is very little difference in the main game from whether 2, 4, 6, or 8 decks are used. The "Suit and Tie" side bet has a lower House Edge for a given pay table as the number of decks increases, because the effect of the dealer card being unavailable is smaller, but different pay tables are available. The Progressive side bet should always use the same number of decks at all tables where it is offered, because different numbers of decks require different pay tables.

How much is the average wager?

Using optimal strategy, it ranges between 1.69 and 2.00 times the Ante, depending on whether the player places a Call bet or no 2nd bet with a card of 5, 6, 7, or 8.

Do the side bets have alternative pay tables?

Yes. The "Suit and Tie" pay tables can be used with 2 through 8 decks although the House Edge is different. The Suit and Tie Progressive wager assumes a 6-deck shoe, but can work with different pay tables if the shoe has more or fewer than 6 decks.

Can a player go “all in”?

No. Raise or Call bets must equal the Ante. If the player has less than that much, he cannot raise or call.

Are other table felts available?

After a Suit and Tie pay table is chosen, a Jackpot wager is chosen (\$1 or \$5), and a decision is made about changing the dealer fold rule on 6s, a dedicated table felt for that variation can be provided, with 5, 6, or 7 player locations as desired.

Is this game difficult to deal?

Although, from the player’s point of view, Bluff can be characterized simply as “One Card Stud Poker”, having a dealer play it against multiple players at once in a table game setting creates several complications which the dealer procedures must address. The current version of the game has been designed to be similar operationally to relatively simple games like Three Card Poker, Four Card Poker, and Caribbean Stud, in order to address these issues.

Like those other three games, the play is divided into six stages:

- I. Ante Wagers and side bets placed
- II. Player hands dealt (may play face up or face down)
- III. Dealer hand dealt face down (order can be switched with the following stage)
- IV. Players choose to place a Raise bet, a Call bet, or no 2nd bet
- V. Dealer turns hand over, settles bets and side bets
- VI. Cards put in discard rack, new hand dealt

In particular, there is no alternation of action between dealer and player, and only a single decision for players to make. This accomplishes several important goals:

- 1) The dealer plays without making any free-willed decisions
- 2) The dealer is not aware of information about his hand that might be communicated to the players at a time when it could help them
- 3) Players are not able to gain information from the dealer’s actions against other players that can assist their own play
- 4) Side bets are easily included without interfering with the play
- 5) Play is faster because of fewer stages and the ability to use a multi-deck shoe rather than shuffling after each hand as in the previously mentioned games
- 6) Game protection issues are minimized

The only complicated part of the dealer procedures is the settlement of bets in the main game. Depending on the dealers’s card, he does one of four things, following Poker logic:

- With 2-3: pays Ante 1:1 when players Raise, showdown for 2 units when players Call, wins Ante when players Fold
- With 4-6: pays Ante 1:1 when players Raise, showdown for 1 unit when they don’t
- With 7-8: showdown for 2 units when players Raise, or for 1 unit when they don’t
- With 9-A: showdown for 2 units when players Raise or Call, wins Ante when they Fold