

Friday, January 28, 2005

The Eudaemonic Pie

I finished *The Eudaemonic Pie* the day before yesterday. The book is the story of a group of, semi-euphemistically, anti-establishment academics, mostly physicists, who set out to build a portable computer that will allow them to beat roulette, a game that shouldn't be predictable. What the scientists discover is that the equations describing the path the ball will take are relatively simple. Not quadratic formula simple, but simple enough that the primitive computers of the day (this was the late '70's) could be programmed to quickly calculate what number the ball would land on to a great degree of accuracy.

It's an astounding idea, really, and a risky one, especially since they planned on storming Las Vegas, a place not known for its tolerance of people beating their systems, whether by hook or by crook. Unfortunately, the technology never really comes together for the group. They make a few successful trips and pull down a few thousand dollars, but the computers they build are so flaky as to be occasionally dangerous (one member has a hole burned in her chest by a misfiring computer). One can easily imagine groups today using the same principles, the same equations, but with new, stabler, smaller, easier-to-program technology to pull it off. In fact, BBC news had a story about two months ago about people trying to beat casinos that dropped this tidbit: "In [a] recent London case, a group of gamblers allegedly used a laser scanner linked to a computer to gauge numbers likely to come up on the roulette wheel." That's essentially what the Eudaemonic people were doing, but with humans timing the wheel and the ball rather than a more accurate but also more dangerous laser.

The book is sprinkled with the scientific happenings at the time, too, from advancements in ideas of chaos to the miniaturization of computer components, that add a lot of flavor. This spice, and the intellectualism and scientific inquisitiveness the author (a part-time member of the group, though not a scientist himself) brings to the table takes this book far beyond the boundaries established by *Bringing Down the House*, the best-selling book about a group of MIT students who take down Vegas the old-school way, by counting cards in blackjack.

Enough people have made the connection between these two stories that Amazon returns *Bringing Down the House* as a result of a search for *Eudaemonic Pie*, but it's a tenuous connection in many ways. The MIT students were motivated by money, sex, and fame, and the book, which reads like a trashy thriller, reflects these crass ideals. The students had no higher calling, though they pretended, at times, to be devoted to the idea of robbing the rich casinos, who made a living off of cheating others. The Eudaemonic group, while they intended to make piles of money, aimed to re-invest that money in a series of communes on the West Coast that would promote the scientific and political ideals they held dear. After the final aborted trip to Las Vegas, the Eudaemonic project was called off, but the group didn't admit total defeat, instead recognizing the physical and technological challenges they had overcome in their attempts to beat the roulette system.

Drawing a weak parallel to more theoretical mathematics, if the search for a proof of the Riemann Conjecture were called off today, mathematicians could still be proud of all the byproducts of that search that had advanced human knowledge of the mathematical world.

Posted by jason in Reading at 15:17