Think-a-Card

in the Aronson Stack

"Think-a-Card" in the Aronson Stack
Simon Aronson

"Think-a-Card" is a fascinating yet challenging premise in card magic. The plot is about as simple and direct as one could imagine— a spectator is shown the faces of the cards and "merely thinks" of any card she sees; the performer then "reads her mind" and tells her what the card is.

We all wish it were that straightforward. In practice, real-world methods can impose significant limitations: on the choices actually available to the spectator, the speed with which the cards are displayed, how many questions the performer must run through, and the occasional chance of an outright failure. And we haven't even mentioned what advance preparations or arrangements the performer might require, if the eventual choice relies on the psychological placement of certain "likely" cards in certain strategic positions.

I'm not offering a "miracle" solution here, because there will be tradeoffs no matter what method one chooses. But every once in a while the fates align and allow us to take a major step forward. If you're a user of the Aronson stack, this is one of those opportunities.

Much has been written, by both me and others, about subsequently discovering patterns within the Aronson stack that were certainly not in my mind when I first arranged it. Part of these are due to sheer chance, and part of it comes from the fact that the gambling sequences, poker deals, and bridge hands I built in themselves contain non-random patterns of certain values or suits which, in turn, bring about better-than-chance opportunities.

Those who know me well think I'm generally pretty cynical and pessimistic. (It's a product of living in the real world. The remedy, at least mine, is to occasionally live in my imagination.) This outlook means that, whenever I'm looking for an assist from chance or dumb luck, I approach it with a mindset ripe for disappointment.

So when serendipity actually works, I'm pleasantly surprised. And on those rare occasions when serendipity actually bends over backward to help out, I am shocked. Recently I've come across an accidental happenstance so coincidently fortunate that it's enough to create a joyful outlook on the world and temporarily inspire hope for mankind — at least for those who use the Aronson stack. (I try to express thanks, even for small pluses.) I've been experimenting with a newly discovered feature of my stack — that's "real-worldly practical." And I'm eager to share it.

* * *

Background

Many card magicians perform some variation of a "think of a card" by fanning or flashing a spread of cards in front of the spectator, so that she can "mentally" think of one she sees (usually, just a few). Such methods often rely on quickly showing only a few cards, while simultaneously watching both the cards and the spectator's eyes, and then ultimately fishing among several possibilities that you yourself "spot." This isn't one of those methods.

In my early writings[1] I've previously explored a number of ways of enhancing fishing among a group of cards. My impetus there was generally to avoid or reduce the number of negative responses one might receive to your fishing probes, because a "No" can be perceived as a mini-failure, or as a guess, or, at a minimum, as disappointing. I'm certainly not against all fishing, and don't abhor a "No" in all cases, but I do typically judge any "multiple out" scenario by its weakest link. So, my goal in practice is to make the maximum number of possible "No's" acceptable. And this, in turn, is partially a function of how many cards the spectator can mentally choose among. (If, for example, you could somehow limit the possible negative responses to an absolute maximum of only two "No's" when fishing out of the full deck of 52 cards, that would be impressive; on the other hand, getting two possible "No's" when you're fishing out of, say, a group of only four or five cards, would be worthless.)

And, like it or not, the spectator's "feeling" or perception of the breadth of her array of possible choices is itself dependent on multiple factors. The chief factor is, of course the reality: the actual number of cards she does get to see and choose among. But an important second factor affecting her feeling of freedom of choice is the *speed* with which she is shown her choices. The goal is, or ought to be, to make sure *she doesn't feel rushed or pressured* to make up her mind under a time constraint. If your spectator is to feel she had a really free choice, you want her to feel (and later remember) that she saw and considered the identity of "many" cards, and that she wasn't influenced by the magician's fast hands, his rapid spreading, his distracting patter, or by cards that were mostly covered or non-visible, while he displayed her available choices. A hastily-felt choice leaves the spectator with the sense that she was somehow limited.

Bottom line: it's better if she feels that she saw a lot of cards to choose among, and that the display was performed leisurely enough for her to feel that she could see and identify each choice on its own, such that any of them truly could have been thought of.

I'll mention one more advantage of a "slow" display. Try an experiment. First, hold up a fan or spread of, say, seven cards, asking a spectator to think of one. Here she sees them all at once, and decides. No more get shown. Now, for another (test) spectator, explain, "In a moment, I'll show you some cards, and as I do, I want you to think of any one you'd like." Now, start dealing cards off the top of the deck one at a time, displaying each face individually to the spectator at a measured pace, until you've shown her seven, and then stop. My experience is that she settles on one *far before you reach the seventh* card. As you show them, she starts off watching eagerly, perhaps liking one initial card, then maybe preferring and changing to a later-seen card. But since she doesn't know precisely how many cards she'll be shown, she decides (at least temporarily) on an early one *because she doesn't know when you'll stop*. When you're displaying cards individually and not "speeding" through them, the spectator feels that "time" is on her side, she's being presented with more, and then even more, choices. She's decides, she changes her mind, now she's seen enough — and yet you're still continuing. Her psychological sense is, hey, I had a bunch of choices, I've now got one, let's get on with it. Sometimes, if you watch her eyes, you can even see that she's decided already, because she drops her glance.

[1] See e.g., "The Aronson Artifice," especially comment 6, (*Card Ideas* (1978), p. 49, also reprinted in my *Bound to Please* (1994), p.53), where I explore the concept of Off-Center Fishing (my take on Orville Meyer's "Principle of the Majorities"); also, my "Simon-Eyes" (*The Aronson Approach* (1990), p.123) which explores the concept of "No No's Fishing" by fishing among more than one spectator simultaneously.

Under this second scenario, seven cards "plays" more unrestricted and can seem like many more choices.

Most fishermen who have tried to maximize how many cards can be "fished" while *never exceeding more than a maximum of two "No's"* realize that it can be achieved with a group size of eight cards.   Not as many realize that, by judiciously selecting particular cards that have just the right combination of variables , you can actually increase the group size to nine cards — and still never get more than two negative answers, (i.e., meaning, that, if you do in fact receive a second No response, at that point you know the specific card.)[2] The basic structure for such a nine-card fishing expedition is as follows:
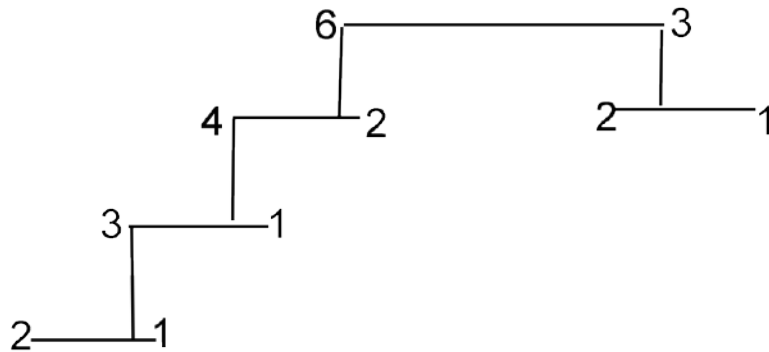
Theoretically you could apply whatever variable pairs (red/black, odd/even, high/low, spot/picture, etc.) you like, at whatever level of the structure you want. Whenever you get an affirmative response to a "fish," you move lower *toward the left,* and when you get a negative response, you move lower *toward the right*. The off-center balance of variables (e.g., say, starting with 6 black cards and 3 red cards) means that a No response narrows down the remaining possibilities more than a Yes. If you trace the various paths in the above diagram, you'll see that any time you hit your second No, you're left with only one of the original nine choices. (An alternate way of viewing this is that this structure of variables never gets more than one No response until you're down to only two possible remaining cards. At that point, your final fish (between these last two possibilities) will result in a second No half the time, and a "hit" the other half). This structure is probably self-explanatory to anyone who's done fishing before, but don't worry if my summary here is a bit concise; I promise it will be clarified and spelled out in detail below.

Nine cards will feel like a lot of choices to a spectator, especially when she sees them one at a time. I can almost guarantee that, in a display of nine individual cards, the spectator will think of one of the earlier ones, and then, when she sees new cards still being shown, she might change her mind to a later one. And the fact that she actually did change her mind enhances her impression of freedom of choice — her own experience now recalls how she thought of one, and then a different one.

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[2] I developed the nine-group structure back in the 1970's, as part of my Off-Center Fishing. I later showed it to John Bannon, because it fit well with his effect "Outer Limits" (see Bannon, *Smoke and Mirrors* (1991), p. 58).

Real World Application

So, given all that background, how can we apply it most advantageously? The shortcut lesson is that, if you were to judiciously select just the right nine cards (a set of cards which nicely fit into the above fishing structure), and you were to bury them *together as a block* somewhere within a full deck, and then as you casually spread through the deck you secretly located that block, and then showed just those cards to a spectator so she could think of any one of them — you could then read her mind.

Note that although the particular nine cards must be all together in one block (so that, as you run through them, you don't reveal the face of any intervening card that isn't a member of your target group), the nine cards *don't* need to be in any particular order within that block. That's because, once your spectator thinks of one of the nine, your fishing "questions" will be asked according to the above fishing organizational structure, which is totally independent of the specific order of those nine cards within the deck.

Such a mind reading effect would be fairly strong and direct — but in the real world governed by performance conditions and time constraints, we don't want to forever remember nine specific cards, or secretly cull them into a self-contained block whenever we want to perform this mind reading effect. As a practical matter, arranging that required setup may not be worth it.

But what if everything has already been done? What if you already have a perfect fishing set of nine particular cards already memorized, which are already together in one block, which block is already located in a perfect location within your deck so that you don't even need to search for the block — because it's already there at your fingertips?

If you've memorized the Aronson stack, *you already have it all*. Serendipity has worked overtime, to provide what I think is a near-perfect arrangement.

<center>*   *   *</center>

The "Big Fish" in the Aronson Pond

The answer, in a nutshell, is to use the bottom nine cards of the Aronson stack. They work perfectly.

That's really all you need to know. Assuming this essay is only being read by Aronson stack aficionados, you already know that group of nine cards by heart, and you generally carry a deck already set up, and the bottom of the deck is, by definition, always immediately "at hand."

The rest of this essay spells it out in detail, with some interesting variants, suggested phrases for more subtle fishing, and some ideas on how to display the cards — but, really, the first sentence says it all. I will now unpack it, so you can see it in operation.

First, let's deal with the "fishing" aspect. There is actually more than one way to arrange these bottom nine cards to fit a nine-card fishing structure, but the most common variable set (first Color, then Suit) works perfectly and is certainly the most convenient.   It will help if you take the bottom nine cards of the Aronson stack (stack numbers 44-52) and lay them out in front of you, in the following pattern:
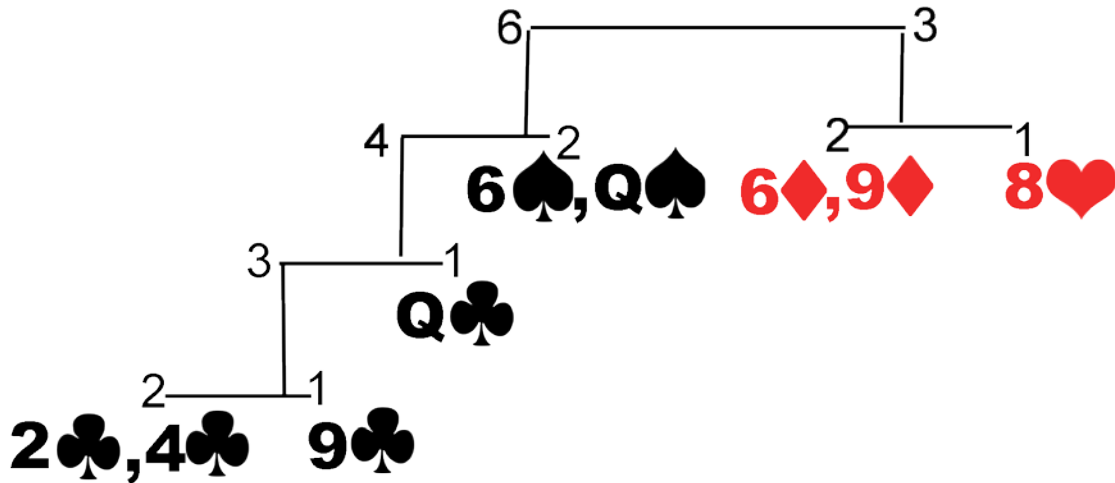
Note that the above pattern (or diagram) is "mental" only; it will only ever exist in your mind, to guide you through the fishing steps. You'll never need to actually arrange physical cards in such a pattern. I recommend committing this pattern to memory, and the best way to do this is to simply stare at it for a few minutes. Think about the pattern in terms of color, and then suits within each color. That's pretty much all you'll need. Your existing memorization of the stack helps immensely, because you won't confuse or mistake any other cards that are outside the range of these nine bottom cards. The act of physically laying out the cards on the table in this tableau is an added aid that helps cement the memory; if you pick up the nine cards, shuffle them up, and re-deal them onto the table into this pattern a few times, you'll find that you'll know it cold, within five minutes.

This pattern or fishing arrangement for the bottom nine cards of the Aronson stack follows the exact structure of, and works perfectly for, the precise kind of fishing we've just been discussing. Conveniently, the black/red color division of these nine cards splits 6/3, thus fitting the requirement for the first, or top, level of the nine-card fishing structure, and the Club/Spade suit division among these six black cards conveniently splits 4/2 — exactly what is required at the second level. And serendipity, bending over backward to assist us, has conveniently split the four Clubs 3/1 (three Spot cards, one Picture card). You can already see your way home, to fish for each and every one of the nine cards. But, following the Funsky adage that "Old guys talk a lot," I will spell it out in even more detail.

Assume for this discussion that your spectator, Ginny, is thinking of one of the nine cards. I'll run through each of the possible fishing scenarios.

1) 2♣ This is arguably the "best" outcome, because you'll receive no No's. Your script would run something like this:

"Ginny, focus first on the strongest feature of your card, its color. I get impressions of both colors, you probably saw both red cards and black cards as your mind looked at the deck, but you finally settled on a **black** one, right? [Yes]

That came through pretty clearly, so now focus on the card's suit. I see a picture of small base, a tripod, and a curved design sitting on it, I think it's a **Club**. [Yes].

You're doing quite well. The value of the card is harder, so let's narrow it down. Don't be too precise, just send me an overall impression — I'm only receiving one color, just black, so it's probably a **spot** card, not a picture card. [Yes]

… and it's definitely a **low** one. [Yes] …

I'd say it's as low as can be, the Two of Clubs."
[That's the most amazing thing I've ever seen — will you marry me?]

Let me mention one somewhat obvious point. In this initial 2C example, and for every one of the other eight cards, your final "fish" will always be between *only two* remaining possibilities. So (putting aside any "psychological reading" of your spectator's reactions or body language) you've got a 50/50 chance to get it correct, no matter which of the two remaining cards you choose to guess. You can take your pick as to which one of the final two you'll "plunk" for, but in many cases, the resulting script or patter "works better" for one choice than the other. This is best illustrated in the QS example below.

2C Summary: Color=Yes, Club=Yes, Spot=Yes, Low=Yes, Two=Yes

Obviously I'm not suggesting that you use my script word for word. Individual personalities, circumstances, spectators, and (perhaps most important) spectators' responses, will vary, so you'll want to adapt and adjust. But the above gives you an idea of how I'd play it, and it forms the template or basis for your fishing probes of most of the remaining eight possibilities.

2) 4♣ This "one No" alternative will play out virtually identical to the above, except for Ginny's response to your very last probe. When you finally suggest "… I'd say it's as low as can be, the Two of Clubs," Ginny will give you her first No or shake her head negatively, to which you'd respond:

"Sorry, there are more Club spots than I first saw, but it definitely is low, maybe a Three, Four, or Five, certainly no higher, concentrate on which one … now it's coming through quite clearly, definitely the Four of Clubs. [Yes!]

4C Summary: Color=Yes, Club=Yes, Spot=Yes, Low=Yes, Two=No, 4C

3) 9♣ Also another "one No" alternative. The script again is virtually the same as #1, except that you'll receive your No earlier, so you'll stop one step sooner. When you suggest "and it's

definitely a low one," Ginny will give you her first No or shake her head negatively — which immediately tells you that it's the 9C. But, instead of just nailing the Nine directly at this point, I like to **include a "gratuitous" probe**. A "gratuitous" probe doesn't produce any new or further information; rather, it's simply a way to generate one more "freebie" affirmative response. (I find this can sometimes "soften" or help bury the previous No response, by surrounding it with one additional "successful" hit. I would always throw in a gratuitous probe to prevent two No's coming one right after the other (see my script below for the 8H or the QS)).

So in this 9C case, for example, after being told that 'No, it's not a low card,' I might continue:

> "Sorry, my mistake, I was focusing on just the center of your card, so I only got a small number of spots, the ones in the middle. But there are a lot more spots, down both sides of your card. It's fairly high, it's either a nine or ten — but don't tell me which. I'll tell you… It's a nine, the Nine of Clubs."

9C Summary: Color=Yes, Club=Yes, Spot=Yes, Low=No, [Gratuitous Nine or Ten], the 9C.

4) Q♣ Yet another "one No" alternative, with an even shorter script. Again, the first two probes (Color, Suit) follow #1. On turning to the value, the script emphasizes that values are "difficult" and you're only going for a "general impression." When you guess "Spot" and get a No, you will know the card exactly, so you can recover the momentum with an excuse and a recovery:

> "Sorry, I was seeing lots of black, but I think that's because there's lots of black all over the card — not just in the corners, but in the clothing, the hat, the collar. It is a picture card, so think of whether it's male, the Jack or King, or female, the Queen. Chance would favor it being a guy, but I'm not going by chance. This time you're definitely thinking of a woman, the Queen of Clubs."

QC Summary: Color=Yes, Club=Yes, Spot=No, QC

That takes care of all four Club cards. The nice thing about all four of these possibilities is that you'll have a continuous string of "Yes's" until the very end, and once you hit that first No, you're then in a position to nail it.

5) Q♠ This is another "one No" alternative, with quite a short script. Again, the first two probes (Color, Clubs) follow #1, but when you suggest Clubs, you'll get a No. Note that your verbal description of the "pip design" helps soften (just a bit) your wrong guess, because it could apply to a Spade (as well as a Club). Ginny's "No" to Clubs tells you it's a Spade, so you're already down to the final two possibilities, either the 6S or the QS. Since the odds are 50/50, which card would you choose to try for next?

Here's how I proceed. First, I throw in a "gratuitous" fish:

"The value of the card is harder, so let's narrow it down bit by bit. Focus on the card's number, its value, odd or even. … the value is definitely even."

Both Six and Queen (= 12) are even, so you know you'll get an affirmative. If, without any hesitation or need for clarification, Ginny confidently and quickly responds "Yes" to your "even" probe, you'll proceed with your next (substantive) probe, but at least you've injected another (gratuitous) Yes to mitigate the prior No.

But in fact, sometimes you'll get an even better, more revealing, response. Sometimes you'll see Ginny momentarily hesitate when you suggest "even." That's because many people don't intuitively think of a Queen as being equal to a value of 12. Ginny might have to think about it, or might look blank. You can quickly follow up your claim that it's "even" with a helpful clarification "…and of course Jacks are 11, Queens are 12, and Kings are 13" and then Ginny will confirm you're right. But if you do sense any such quizzical reaction to your "even" probe, you're home free. She wouldn't have been hesitant if she were thinking of the Six, so you'll know exactly which of the two alternatives it is, namely, the QS. That kind of bonus information does occasionally happen.

But, assuming that Ginny forthrightly confirms, without hesitation, that her card is even, you haven't lost anything, and you proceed with your final probe by saying:

> "I'll continue to narrow down the value a bit more. When you first decided on a card, you initially wavered between spot cards and picture cards, but I think you finally settled on a **picture** card, right?" [Yes]… Good, I thought so because I received several different colors. Now, think of which picture card it is… it's not the Jack, … but it is the Queen, you're thinking of the Queen of Spades." [That's fantastic!]

I opted to go for Picture (= the Queen, instead of the Six) for two reasons. First, based on my limited and unscientific testing, when it's come down to this pair, my random test subjects have more often thought of the QS. My second reason for guessing Picture (i.e., the Queen) is explained in our next example, the 6S.

QS Summary: Color=Yes, Club=No, [Gratuitous "Even value"=Yes], Picture=Yes, QS

6) 6♠ This is our first "double No" situation. It follows # 5 above exactly. The only difference is that when you guess it's a picture card, that's where you receive your second No. But you're in a very good position to finish strong. Why? Because as far as Ginny knows, there are still ten available candidates (all the Spade spot cards) — but in fact you know the precise card, the 6S. You can now make the most out of an apparent 1 out of 10 range. (That is my second reason for choosing Picture in #5 above. If I'm going to get a second No, I'd rather my ensuing final "hit" be perceived as successfully getting 1 out of 10, rather than only 1 out of 3.)

So, on being told No, it's not a picture card, I can respond:

"Well, I got that it was black, and its value is even. There are a number of possibilities still open, but I'm going to take a chance and go for broke — you're thinking of the Six of Spades." [Wow!]

6S Summary: Color=Yes, Club=No, [Gratuitous "Even value"=Yes], Picture=No, 6S

Next we turn to the red cards. Obviously each of the three red choices will open with a No response (because your first guess is always black), but because there are so few red cards, the fishing is always rather brief.

7) 8♥ This is the second "double No" situation. The opening gambit is, of course:

> "Ginny, focus first on the strongest feature of your card, its color. I get impressions of both, you probably saw both red cards and black cards as your mind looked at the deck, but you finally settled on a **black** one, right? [No]
>
> Maybe I can do better with the value, the number of the card. When you first decided on a card, you initially wavered between spot cards and picture cards, but then you finally settled on just one, so concentrate on it. Picture cards come through with several different colors, but this time I'm only getting a strong sense of red from you, no other colors, so it's got to be a **spot** card, right?" [Yes] … Good, I thought so."

This second probe is a gratuitous one, because all the red choices are spot cards — but, of course, Ginny isn't aware of that. So you'll get some credit for knowing it's a spot card, while putting the first negative response one step further behind you. We now need to narrow down which of the three red cards it is, and the suit split of 2/1 gives us another off-center probe:

> "I get the impression of a simple geometric design, it has several points — a **Diamond."**

Two out of three times (for either the 6D or the 9D, as discussed below) you'll be correct, but in this instance, for the 8H, you'll get your second No. But at least you can finish up strong. As far as Ginny knows (if indeed she analyzes such things) there are still ten possibilities remaining (the ten Heart spot cards), but in fact you now know the precise card, so you can make the most of it:

> "OK, let's see if I can nail the value. I got that it's a spot card, but it might be anywhere from Ace up to Ten. Focus on the numerical value. I'm getting the sense of an **even** number. [Yes], and it's definitely in the **high**er part of that range [Yes] — you're thinking of the Eight of Hearts." [That's right!]

8H Summary: Color=No, [Gratuitous "spot"=Yes], Diamond=No, [Gratuitous Even=Yes, Gratuitous High =Yes], 8H

8 and 9) 6♦, 9♦ These two cards round out the last of our alternatives. Again, the opening three probes follow the steps in # 7 above:

"Ginny, focus first on the strongest feature of your card, its color. I get impressions of both, you probably saw both red cards and black cards as your mind looked at the deck, but you finally settled on a **black** one, right? [No]

Maybe I can do better with the value, the number of the card. When you first decided on a card, you initially wavered between spot cards and picture cards, but then you finally settled on just one, so concentrate on it. Picture cards come through with several different colors, but this time I'm only getting a strong sense of red from you, no other colors, so it's got to be a **spot** card, right?" [Yes] … Good, I thought so.

"I get the impression of a simple geometric design, it has several points — a **Diamond.**" [Yes]

With two cards left, you might suspect that a final fish will produce either a yes or a no, each about half the time. Instead, I use a small ambiguity to minimize the No events, as follows:

"Let's focus on the value. I already got that it's a spot card, but now let's focus on the precise number of spots, from Ace up to Ten. I'm getting the impression of lots of spots, so it's **at the high end of the spectrum**, right?"

If Ginny is thinking of the 9D, she'll give you a definite Yes. And then you're home free. If, however, she's thinking of the 6D, she'll either give you a No, or a hesitant, "Well, more in the middle" (or something like that). As soon as I hear (or sense) that kind of wavering, I quickly jump in with a clarification:

"Let me explain. Low is the bottom half, from Ace to Five. High is the top half, from Six to Ten."

Once Ginny hears this, and now sees what you "meant," she'll offer a confirming Yes (because both 6D and 9D are in that "higher" half). But, of course, her hesitation just before this last exchange tells you that she must be thinking of the Six, so again you're home free.

After thus "verifying" that it's in the higher end of the spectrum, you can now proceed to nail it.

Finally, let me mention one alternative fishing ploy that seems to be quite acceptable to laymen for these last two cards. Once you've got the Yes respond to Diamond, you could just forget about fishing "high" for that last step. You can instead just posit:

"Focus on the value, the number. Good, I can see it straightaway, but it may be coming in upside down. It's either a six or a nine, but I really can't quite tell which. I'd guess a nine, but it could be either. Does that sound about right?"

And, surprisingly, on my few tests, the spectator has seemed to accept this as a "hit." Don't forget, Ginny won't recall that the 6D and 9D were both among the available choices; she's just been thinking of one of them.

6D, 9D Summary: Color=No, [Gratuitous "spot"=Yes], Diamond=Yes, High=Yes, 9D (or unsure=6D)

<center>*   *   *</center>

Displaying the Cards

Many readers will likely have their own preferred way to display the nine cards so that the spectator will feel that the cards she saw were "random," and that she saw enough cards so that her choice was free. The fact that the nine card block starts at the bottom of the stack eliminates any awkward or unnatural get-ready. For completeness, I'll just mention a few ways to accomplish this display.

The simplest procedure is to cut the pack, maintaining a break below the 9D with your left pinky. With the deck held in left hand mechanic's grip lift up the deck with the faces toward your spectator, Ginny. Your right hand approaches to begin a tight spread of just the block of cards above the break. The first card Ginny should see is the face of the 9D, and the right hand continues to "back spread" the cards in a fan, so that Ginny successively sees the 2C, then the QC, and so on. As you spread the cards to show them to Ginny, your left hand masks the bottom card (so she can't quite see its face), while you use your right forefinger to cover the indices of all the cards above those you're spreading (so she can't see any of those cards). Make sure you don't spread more than a total of eight cards. The result is that Ginny sees a fan of cards in the center of the deck — and they will be the relevant nine cards. It's easy to maintain the break below the 9D during this display; that allows you to square up after you've shown her a "bunch" of cards, and cut at the break to bring the deck back to original stack order.

While the above is a fairly standard way of handling the necessary display, it's *not* my preferred manner, for two reasons. First, as explained earlier, I'd rather show the cards individually (not just as part of a fan or spread), because I think displaying cards one at a time emphasizes the "large number" of choices and takes a bit longer, which in turn makes the spectator feel unhurried. Second, I find it a bit awkward to "back spread" the cards at the same time as you display them.

I've played around with two simple alternative procedures to accomplish the necessary display, both of which I think have merit.

Stack Order Display

Before you begin any display, casually spread the face-down deck between your hands, so you can sight count eight cards from the bottom (I do a wide spread of the bottom portion and then sight count a block of four cards, and then a second group of four cards). Take a left pinky break above these eight (i.e., below the 6S) and square up, maintaining the break. Pick up the deck with your right hand from above, with your right thumb at the rear taking over the break. Swing cut a block of cards off the top into your left hand, and place that block to the bottom of the deck.

<center>12</center>

Square up the deck in the left hand, holding the break with the left pinky. You're now ready to begin the display.

Address Ginny, "In a moment, I'll show you some cards and I want you to think of one that catches your eye. You don't need to physically touch a card, and I don't want you to even say anything. Just focus on the cards as they go by, think of one of them, and remember it. OK?" As you say this, start spreading the cards *between your hands, face down*, timing your spread so you reach the general area of the break as you finish your instruction. When you reach the break, push all the cards above the break into a loosely squared block held in your right hand (right fingers below, right thumb above) and lift this block up so that Ginny can see the card at its face (the 6S). In a continuing motion your left thumb pushes off the top card of the left-hand packet, as the right hand lowers to take this card (the 4C) onto the face of the right-hand cards, covering the face of the 6S. Now raise your right hand to display the 4C, as the second available choice for Ginny to consider. Continue in that same way to successively take cards singly from the top of the left packet onto the face of the right-hand packet, lifting your right hand packet each time to show the full face of each new card to Ginny. If you do this for all nine cards, you'll find that you can proceed fairly rapidly, yet the complete display will "feel" like a lot of cards. (Just be sure you silently count, so that you don't go beyond the 9D). Once you do reach the 9D, I sort of shrug, saying, "You've probably got one by now, right?" as I square the right-hand cards onto the left packet, to reassemble the deck. (It's a simple matter to take a break below the 9D (the last card shown) as you square up, so that you can cut back to original stack order).

I like this because the "back spread" (to sight count eight) is done at a relaxed moment, before you begin, and it's easy because you're spreading from the bottom of the deck.

Reverse Order Display

This second procedure is even easier, because it eliminates any "back spread." It's similar to the foregoing display, except that here we'll display the cards starting with the 9D and ending with the 6S, i.e., displayed in reverse stack-number order. Hence my two different display "names."

Again, before you begin the display, hold the deck with your right hand from above, swing cut a block of cards off the top into your left hand, and replace that block to the bottom of the deck, obtaining a left pinky break between the two blocks (i.e., below the 9D). You're now ready to begin the display.

We'll start off the same as above. Address Ginny, "In a moment, I'll show you some cards and I want you to think of one that catches your eye. You don't need to physically touch a card, and I don't want you to even say anything. Just focus on the cards as they go by, think of one of them, and remember it. OK?" As you say this, start spreading the cards *between your hands, face down*, timing your spread so you reach the general area of the break as you finish your instruction. When you reach the break, push all the cards above the break into a loosely squared block held in your right hand (right fingers below, right thumb above) and lift this block up so that Ginny can see the card at its face (in this case, the 9D).

From here on, we'll proceed "in reverse," i.e., the right hand will drop cards off the face of its packet one at a time, to reveal the next card. Here's the detail. Once you've shown the 9D to Ginny, your right fingers apply a light pressure on the face of the 9D, just enough so that the right second and third fingers can push or sidejog the 9D a bit toward the left. As this happens, lift your left hand (with its squared packet) up to a vertical position, bringing it slightly in front of the sidejogged 9D. In this position, the left thumb goes behind the sidejogged 9D and takes it onto the top of the left-hand packet. Then lower the left hand. This reveals the next card, the 2C. Display the 2C to Ginny for a moment, and repeat the same actions, taking the 2C off the right-hand packet and onto the left-hand packet, thus revealing the QC. Then continue with each of the ensuing cards. Mentally keep track of how many cards you move from the right to the left; once you've dealt off eight cards, Ginny will be looking at the 6S. At that point, you finish as before and square up. (And, of course, if you want to return to original stack order, just hold a left pinky break below the first card you deal off, the 9D).

<p style="text-align:center">*   *   *</p>

That's about all I have to say about the happy discovery of an almost-perfect fishing combination, located exactly where you'd want it to be.

I've seen "Think-a-Card" presented in many ways, from a quick "throwaway" trick to serious mind reading. However it's presented, it needs both your personality to individualize it, and a routine to develop what happens both before and after.

But so long as you carry a deck in Aronson stack order and you know your stack cold, it's comforting to know that this "Think-a-Card" is always instantly available.

Comments (and Theory)

1) *How Many Cards?* Why did I choose nine cards (instead of more)? I think my answer is probably mainly historical: nine was the number I came up with long ago because everyone else had stopped at eight. My concept of Off-Center Fishing was formed way back in the early 70's, as an attempt to break away from, and get beyond, fishing as it was then being done. Much of the early prior stuff was "binary" — just splitting things evenly down the middle. I was (and still am) turned off by No responses, so I try to avoid them; prior to my exploration, the No's were coming in half the time, just as you'd expect on a binary tree.

My concept is quite close to Orville Meyer's "Principle of the Majorities," which predated me (see Meyer's *Magic in the Modern Manner*, 1949). Meyer's suggestion for fishing was to guess whatever variable happened to be in the majority among the remaining choices; he offered his principle as a way of fishing among whatever random cards were presented to you. The main (perhaps the only) difference between his concept and mine was (because I was so fascinated by stacks and setups) that I applied it to pre-selecting the ideal cards, pre-arranging cards along an off-center, unbalanced tree, to insure an optimal result.

But there's no theoretical reason or limitation for stopping at nine. For instance, the easiest and most practical extension is to just add one more card. Use **the bottom ten cards** of my stack

instead of just the bottom nine (this adds the KS, stack number 43, to our original nine). The fishing would proceed exactly as in the text for the QS — except that, once you got a Yes response to your "picture" probe, you wouldn't yet know the precise card, because it could be either the QS or the KS. But a simple fish between those two would be correct half the time, and the other half you'd be wrong, but it would only be your second No (which is within the theoretical parameters I've set for myself).

So, why not opt for those ten? First, as stated, I dislike No responses. While I've set a limit of two No's as something that I can live with, that doesn't mean that two No's are on equal footing with only one No. Clearly not. So, even though my system will tolerate a maximum of two No's, I'd still prefer as few "two No" cases as possible. The nine card situation I've offered actually has only two "two No's" (or three, if you do the final 6D/9D as a straight fish, without using my suggested ambiguities).   Once you add the KS as a tenth card, you're adding one more double No possibility, on that final fish. So, that's a strike against it.

My second reason goes to the heart of the whole fishing enterprise (or any trick): is the tradeoff worth it? Is a larger number of available card choices worth the additional complication in the method of fishing? This is clearly an individual judgment call, but my approach (argued in the text above) is that in weighing such a tradeoff, rather than looking at the objective number of cards actually available to display, you should instead by looking at *the number of available choices as perceived by your spectator*. Does the spectator "feel" limited with nine cards? If she does, then (but only then) would I consider a slightly more convoluted fishing expedition. But once she's seen enough cards such that she feels her choice is free, unguided, and unpressured, and once she believes that you might have continued to run through even more cards, had she not already decided (or evinced boredom), then any further addition of yet more cards doesn't really benefit the effect. I've found (so far) that nine cards, displayed at a deliberate pace, is enough to satisfy the spectator's desire. But I'm certainly open to change.

2) *Other Possible Groups.* When I submitted my first draft to my editor Matt Baker (magician, mathematician extraordinaire, and an avid user of the Aronson stack), Matt quickly offered concrete evidence that larger groups of cards are possible — not just theoretically, but working within the confines of my stack—by suggesting three alternative groups. All of them are instantly accessible (i.e., on the top or bottom of the Aronson stack). Here they are, in Matt's shorthand (with a few edits and additions by me).

Bottom Thirteen Cards

"Let me suggest a way to do the same effect with the **bottom 13 cards** (rather than just the bottom 9) of your stack, and still be guaranteed to get at most two NO's (i.e., stack numbers 40-52).
Start, as you do, by asking if their card is **black**.

Case 1: They say NO.
You're left with the four red possibilities: 6D, 9D, 8H, 9H.
Say that you think it's **either a 6 or a 9**...

      Case 1a: They say NO ==> then it's the 8H.

Case 1b: They say YES ==> now you know it's the 6D, 9D, or 9H. Proceed as in the Red case in your write-up, asking next if it's a Diamond...

Case 2: They say YES.
You're left with the 3C, 2S, KS in addition to the 7 black cards you already use.
Ask if their card is a **Club**.

Case 2a: They say NO ==> it must be the 2S, 6S, QS, or KS. You have one NO left to use.
Say that their card is an **Even-numbered card**. If they say NO, it must be the KS. If they say YES, it's the 2, 6, or Q.
Say that it's a **Low card**. If NO, it's the QS, if YES it's the 2 or 6 and you still have one NO left.

Case 2b: They say YES ==> it must be the 2,3,4,9, or Q of clubs.
Say it's a **Low card**. If NO, it's the 9C or QC and you still have one more NO to go. If YES, it's the 2, 3, or 4 of Clubs.
Say it's an **Even number**. If NO, it's the 3C. If YES, it's either the 2 or 4, and you still haven't received a NO."

Matt, being ever resourceful, also offers this alternative:

Top Ten Cards

"You can use the **top 10 cards** of your stack to achieve a similar effect.

Start once again by asking if their card is **black**.

Case 1: They say NO.
You're left with the 2H, 3H, and 8D as possibilities.
Piece of cake: ask if it's a **Heart**.
Case 1a: They say NO. Then it's the 8D.
Case 1b: They say YES. Then it's either the 2H or 3H and you have one NO left.

Case 2: They say YES.
The possibilities now are the JS, KC, 5C, 9S, AS, 6C, and AC.
Ask if it's a **Club**.

Case 2a: They say NO.
You're down to the 9S, JS, and AS with one NO still available. Say that you think it's a **number (or Spot) card**.
If they say NO, it's the JS. If they say YES, it's the 9S or AS and you have one NO left.

Case 2b: They say YES.
Then it must be the AC, 5C, 6C, or KC and you still have two NO's left.
Say that you think it's a **number (or Spot)** card.

If they say NO, it's the KC. If they say YES, it's the AC, 5C, or 6C and you still have two NO's left. There are several ways to go. You could suggest mid-range (or multiple spots), where a NO tells you it's the Ace, and a YES narrows it down to 5 or 6. It then takes at most only one NO to finish it.

Top Twelve Cards

"With a bit more work you can even extend the above 'Top Ten' procedure to the **top 12 cards** in your stack. This results in the following modifications:
In case 1b, you've gotten one NO at this point and you know it's either the 2H, 3H, or 5H. Say it's an **Odd card**... if NO then it's the 2H, if YES you still have one NO to use and you're down to the 3 or 5.
In case 2a, you've used up one NO at this point, and you know it's either the 9S, 10S, JS, or AS. Say it's a **Number (or Spot)** card. If NO, it's the JS. If YES, it's the A, 9, or 10.
Now say it's an **Odd** number. If NO, it's the 10S. If YES, it's the A or 9, and you still have one No left, for the final fish."

Matt acknowledges (and I concur) that in these larger groups the fishing isn't always in the most straightforward order, and that the alternatives are a bit harder to remember.

I personally think that spectators react well to certain fishing variables that are intuitive and easy to understand (like color, suit, high/low, picture/spot). (I'd rather not employ odd/even as a variable unless I really have to; it seems a bit too mathematical for my taste. With my block of nine I've eliminated using the odd/even variable, except in the gratuitous probes that that accomplish other goals (and which could be dropped, if you wish)).

Matt doesn't argue that one *should* necessarily use one of his examples instead of my suggested nine. He's just pointing out their availability within the Aronson stack, as an example that one needn't stop at just nine cards. (Or, as Matt joked, "You could also view this as further evidence of the divine nature of the Aronson stack if you wish.")

3) *No No's Fishing.* This suggestion stretches beyond the express parameters of this article, but its theme falls squarely within a discussion of fishing. My discussion of fishing with the 9-card stack prompted Matt Baker to re-visit my effect "Simon-Eyes," which explores in excruciating detail the idea of always guaranteeing a "No No" situation by having two spectators each think of a card. By probing (fishing) the features of both cards *simultaneously* (thus eliciting a Yes or No response from both spectators) you could judiciously choose the cards available to each spectator such that you always would receive *at least one Yes* response.

Matt creatively combined the above idea with the 9-card stack, and the (again) happy location of the 6C in the Aronson stack, to produce a two-spectator version with major efficiencies. You'll be able to discern two thought of cards with No No's; the price you pay for this result is the addition of one force (and the requirement of a second spectator). Here, in Matt's shorthand, is his outline of how to accomplish it.

"Begin by forcing the 6C on spectator A. (That card, at stack number 8, is fairly conveniently placed for an under-the-spread force, which would work fine here, but you could use any clean-looking force where a card is just looked at, but not selected.)

Now have spectator B just think of a card, using the same 9 cards (#44-52). Emphasize that both spectators are now just THINKING of a card...

In all situations, you then say the same things in the same order:

1. I'm getting an impression of a black card. Which of you is sending me that impression?
2. I'm seeing a round shape, like a club or a heart. Which of you is sending me that thought?
3. I'm getting an impression of a spot card...
4. I'm sensing a medium-sized number, like a 4 or 6...

Spectator A's response (about her 6C) will always be a Yes, so you'll appear as if you're clearly honing in on at least one person's (i.e., A's) thoughts. Meanwhile, the simultaneous responses of B will narrow down her card, within the 9-card group. In all scenarios you can now correctly tell both spectators their card."

Feel free to go back to "Simon-Eyes" for elaboration on No No's Fishing, but Matt's outline gives you enough to accomplish this variation.

4) *Attitude*. While I certainly employ fishing in specific tricks, and on spontaneous occasions where the opportunity presents itself, I do so sparingly. I have ambivalent feelings toward fishing, depending on how it will be perceived by your spectator. My issue is that if it looks or feels like "guessing," then it's no longer magical — because the spectator "knows the method." Even when you get the probes right, once you appear to be hedging your bet, or flipping among alternatives, or not appearing open and clear-speaking, then she's not going to think it's impossible, or mind reading, or even a puzzle. She senses what you're doing — seeing whether you can guess it correctly. She might give you credit for being a good guesser, or for being a bad comedian (if you mention "cherry colored cards"), but neither such praise remotely suggests that you created a moment of magic.

For successful "realistic" fishing, it helps to convey certain psychological attitudes as you make each successive probe. For instance:

• Your suggestions should sound like statements made with some affirmative force, instead of simply bare questions. Being the friendly fellow you are, you might include a "request for confirmation" (which in fact is a question to "soften" it), but that question part is often just tagged on at the end, to give yourself some leeway. (You understand this concept, right?).

• As in equivoque, you want to speak with confidence, so that your correct probes will be remembered as you having firmly committed yourself.

• You also want to plant a seed that can be used to cover the "No" when it occurs. For instance, instead of "a Low one" you might draw a scene, "Your mind went back and

forth between two red cards, one high, one low. At first one appealed to you, but then you thought it might be the popular one that everyone might think of, so you ultimately opted for the low one." Here, if you're wrong, perhaps there's something in the rest of your depicted scene that resonates with how she decided, so she won't think that you're "completely" wrong.

• "Everyone knows that a mind reader won't get it 100%." (I've often wondered how people would know this? Based on what model?) But since that's the prevalent, if not plausible, assumption, about mind reading, you can excuse the No's with your disclaimer that you're typically only 85% successful. Even if you were truly channeling her mind, it's obvious that there could be intermittent static on that channel…

• If you're presenting your fishing as "reading body language," or "tells," or "personality profiling" ("Someone with your sense of humor usually goes for a Club…") then it's OK to miss, because you're not aiming for a magical, impossible outcome. Rather, you're demonstrating a skill that you're learning (but have already got pretty good at).

Summary: Unless you want to toss the sense of magic away, and instead be content with being a fun entertainer who's just "playing," then regardless of how well your cards are stacked, your presentation and personality still needs to incorporate this kind of acting, to appear as if you're really believing and committing yourself to something. And that's often hard to pull off successfully. At least you've got the cards to start you off. Good luck.

5) *Mnemonica.* While the particular card combinations I discuss are specific to the Aronson stack, I've searched and there are a number of similar fishing patterns available within Mnemonica. (Not all are quite as ideal as the one I found in Aronson, but they're certainly workable).

I won't go too deeply into the details, but basically you're looking for a 9-card consecutive sequence where the colors divide 6/3 (and you could look "around the horn"). In Mnemonica you can find such 9 card sequences at stack numbers 29-37; 40-48; 42-50; and 51-7. The colors in these sequences give you a 6/3 color split, but you don't get precisely what you want when you get to fishing level #2.

But the best is yet to come. Take a look at the Mnemonica sequence from 43-51. This works for both for Color (6 Black and 3 Red), and for Suit (Blacks 4 Clubs and 2 Spades), and the rest of the splits work extremely well for the final fishing. Moreover, it's located so close to the face of the deck that it's easily accessible. Indeed, if you add stack number 52 (the 9D) to the sequence and thus use a 10 fishing stack, you can use the full bottom ten cards to do your fishing, just as in my Stack.

And, at this particularly poignant and divisive time in the world, it's gratifying to be able to share and include the other half of the mem-deck world in this relatively small discovery. At least magic is still able to try the impossible.