Poker match pits man vs. machine in world first match

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Poker champion Phil "The Unabomber" Laak will square off against a U of A-designed poker-playing computer program this summer.

A poker-playing computer program developed at the University of Alberta will battle against a pair of poker kings in a $50,000 contest this summer.

Polaris, the reigning world champion computer poker program, will challenge two of the sharpest poker players in the world, professionals Phil "The Unabomber" Laak and Ali Eslami. The two-day event will happen in conjunction with the Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence's annual conference, held this year on July 23 and 24 at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Vancouver B.C.

"This is a world first, and, I hope, the beginning of something that will grow and become an annual event," said Dr. Jonathan Schaeffer, a team leader of the Polaris program.

Schaeffer believes the event is an evolution of the 1997 match between IBM's "Deep Blue" chess program and Garry Kasparov, the world chess champion at the time.

"The difference is that chess is a game of perfect knowledge, meaning there is nothing hidden from the players. In poker you can't see your opponent's hand and you don't know what cards will be dealt. This makes poker a much harder challenge for computer scientists from an artificial intelligence perspective," Schaeffer said.

The competition will feature four Texas Hold 'Em matches between Polaris and the two poker playing professionals. In each match Laak and Eslami will play simultaneously against Polaris in separate rooms. At the end of each match, Laak and Eslami will combine their chip totals and compare them against Polaris' combined total. The professionals will earn cash for each match they win.

Each match will consist of 500 hands, with the cards dealt in duplicate, meaning that Polaris will receive the same cards in one room that the professional will receive in the other room, and vice-versa. The duplicate system will be employed in order to balance out the luck of the cards and emphasize the capabilities of the participants.

"How good is Polaris? I don't know, but we should be able to learn a lot about our program in Vancouver this summer," Schaeffer said. "It's going to be a lot fun."

Source: University of Alberta

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