

6

Playing Poker Online

Would you be surprised to learn that, at any given time, there might be more than a half million people playing poker simultaneously over the Internet with *real money*? What's more, there might be as many as triple that number playing with free chips. It's true! With more than 1,800 Internet casinos and poker rooms, thousands of players are regularly logging in to play poker with people who might live as close as just down the street, or as far as a continent away. Playing poker over the Internet is as sophisticated as some of the more well-known and popular multiplayer computer simulation games, such as Doom and Myst; online poker games often include full color graphics, animation, and the ability to talk or *chat* with other players.

In this chapter, you learn how to get started playing poker over the Internet, either with play chips or real money. You learn about the current legal status of gambling over the Internet and the various ways you can fund a player account if you decide to play with your own money. You learn about the pros and cons of playing poker online versus in a brick-and-mortar card room or casino, and pick up tips for how best to select an online poker room to suit your playing style. We cover how to evaluate an online poker room and download the gaming software to your computer.

In this chapter:

- * Compare online poker to casino poker
- * Learn how to choose the best online poker room
- * Learn how to set up an account and play your first online game
- * Understand how to detect and avoid collusion and cheating online
- * Find out how to spot online tells

One of the most exciting aspects of Internet poker is the ease, speed, and popularity of Internet poker tournaments. Poker tournaments are an ideal way to practice your poker skills for what is often a one-time, up-front low investment, where the payoff can be tremendous if you make the final table. Playing in online tournaments is faster than playing in brick-and-mortar tournaments because the computer handles every aspect of managing the tournament. More and more, poker players are honing their poker skills by playing in poker tournaments over the Internet. After reading this chapter, you'll be ready to play in your first tournament, too. Later on, an entire chapter is devoted to playing tournament poker and covers the specifics of playing in online tournaments. After reading this chapter, you'll have all the essential information needed to choose an online poker room, set up an online poker account, and start playing your favorite poker games over the Internet.



To do list

- Consider the advantages of online poker
- Weigh the disadvantages of online play
- Set up guidelines for managing your online bankroll

Playing Online Versus Playing Live

Internet poker is a thriving, if not exploding, business. By some estimates, online poker rooms rake in more than \$5 billion a year! When you consider that as recently as 1998 you couldn't play poker for real money over the Internet, this growth is all the more impressive.

As you might expect, the same factors contributing to the renaissance of poker in general are also helping to popularize online poker. One factor is the televised coverage of major poker tournaments on cable networks, such as ESPN, Travel Channel, and Bravo, that include ads for online poker rooms like PartyPoker.com. Another factor is the "celebrity" status of some World Series of Poker champions, such as Greg Raymer (2004) and Chris MoneyMaker (2003). Both of these champions, through amazing journeys, won their seats in the World Series of Poker Championship event by first winning smaller tournaments on PokerStars.com—one of the world's largest online poker rooms. These two incredible victories help prove once and for all that online poker is not a passing phenomenon, but a tremendously exciting growth segment for the poker industry. Whether you acquire and perfect your poker skills online or in a traditional brick-and-mortar card room, one thing is true—either way, you can become a world champion.

Without question, though, the biggest reason online poker is exploding is very simple. There's big money to be won! Online poker is drawing millions of new players who might not otherwise have access to poker games, thus pumping a fresh source

of revenue into the resurgent poker economy. With millions being wagered online everyday by people all over the world, it is not uncommon to see online tournament payouts in the hundreds of thousands. Let's face it, there are not too many amateur sporting events where, for an entry fee of less than a hundred dollars, you have the chance to win well over a million dollars! But that's becoming more common in the world of tournament poker, whether it be online or in a traditional casino.

Considering the Advantages of Online Play

Besides the obvious features of convenience and accessibility, online poker rooms offer numerous other advantages. Here are just some of the advantages of playing online poker:

- Online poker rooms usually take a smaller *rake*, or portion of each pot, than brick-and-mortar poker rooms, so you end up keeping more of the pot. Plus, there's no tipping online, while in a casino or poker room, it is customary to tip the dealer when you win a pot.
- You can play in the comfort and convenience of your own home while wearing your favorite slippers, lucky tee shirt, or birthday suit! What's more, because you do not have to sit next to players that might have habits you find distasteful (like smoking, for example), playing online can be a more pleasant experience.
- In online poker rooms you don't have to wait for a seat, unlike many live poker rooms. Couple more available tables with online poker's wide variety of games and table stakes and you can see why players enjoy logging in versus walking in to a casino.
- In online poker rooms, you can play for much smaller stakes than you can in a brick-and-mortar poker room or casino. Almost all online sites let you play for free and most sites offer games for as little as \$.02/\$.04. Yes, that's two cents/four cents. These online casinos know it is likely you will progress to bigger table stakes!

note It used to be said that poker takes an hour to learn and a lifetime to master. However, with online poker this is no longer the case. Online, games are dealt three to five times faster than in traditional card rooms, and players can be in multiple games at once, thereby playing hundreds of hands per hour. As a result, players are amassing what equates to a lifetime of experience in one-half to one-third of the normal time.

caution

Be careful, though! Playing poker over the Internet is fast, fun, and accessible whenever and wherever you have an Internet connection. Like any hobby or activity you enjoy doing, moderation is the key. If you're the type who's apt to gamble away your life's savings one click at a time, it is best to stick with play chips and keep your credit card in your wallet. You can still have lots of fun playing online without having to suffer any downside when the credit card bill shows up at the end of the month!



- Many online poker sites offer special sign-on bonuses, frequent player points, and other incentives designed to get you to become a regular at their site. Although it is true that most brick-and-mortar casinos also offer preferred player cards, few casinos hand you a cash bonus like online poker rooms are offering for playing in their poker rooms.
- You can play in multiple games at one time. Experienced poker players might simultaneously play in a No-Limit Texas Hold ‘em tournament, for example, while also playing a regular game of Seven Card Stud. In addition, online poker is played considerably faster than casino poker, because the computer does all of the card shuffling, dealing, chip counting, and money management.

In addition to being able to play on multiple tables, another exciting feature about playing poker online is the increasingly popular online poker tournament circuit. At any time of the day or night, you can participate in what is known as a *sit and go* tournament that starts as soon as a minimum number of players register and sit down to a table. Sit and go tournaments can be played for as little as \$5 or as much as \$1,000 or more. The greater the buy-in, the greater the prize pool.

Taking a Look at Online Poker’s Disadvantages

Despite its advantages, online poker isn’t for everyone and there are some downsides. First, because you’re not playing against “live” opponents, you can’t read a player’s body language or facial expressions for clues about what hand he might be holding. For some players who take pride in their ability to read people at the poker table, playing online can prove very challenging (see “Spotting Online Tells,” later in this chapter). Second, you can’t enjoy the social aspect of the game when you play online because most online players interact very little. Some sites are getting more sophisticated and offering players chat areas and discussion lobbies, but playing online poker still feels much like playing against the computer and not like playing against other, real people.

Perhaps the biggest downside of online poker is one of its advantages—the ease and accessibility of finding a game, no matter the time of day. For some, this can be troublesome because the convenience and privacy of online poker can lead to long hours of playing poker in isolation. It becomes far too easy to lose track of time and whittle away hours upon hours playing poker over the Internet.

In addition, managing your online bankroll takes enormous discipline because it is so easy to simply call a bet by clicking your mouse. Some people find they just play poker more recklessly online than they do in real card rooms. If you run out of money online, it’s easy to add more money to your account. The reality of how much money you spend playing poker online doesn’t sink in until you see your



bank statement. Overall, playing poker online is fun and exciting, but when you're new, it takes discipline and good self-management to play well and not lose a lot of money. We offer some tips for managing your bankroll during online play in the next section of this chapter.

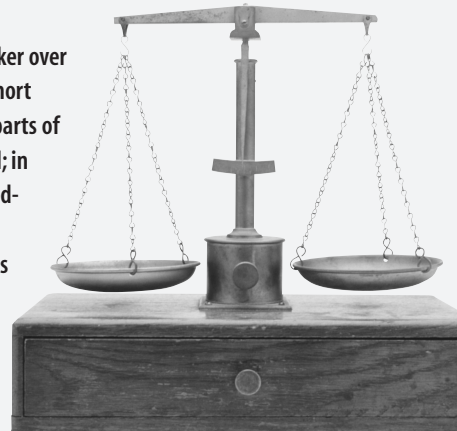
tip If you're new to online poker, limit your playing time to one or two hours per session. You can play many more hands per hour online than in a brick-and-mortar casino, so if fatigue sets in, it can quickly affect your bankroll.

GAMBLING OVER THE INTERNET—IS IT LEGAL?

The first question many people ask when thinking about playing poker over the Internet with real money is whether it is considered legal. The short answer is that there is no definite answer to this question. In some parts of the world, such as the Caribbean, gambling over the Internet is legal; in other areas, such as Hong Kong, it isn't. In the United States, some federal and state legislators are questioning whether online poker violates the Wire Act of 1961 that expressly prohibits placing sports bets over telephone lines. Because of this, all of the booming online casinos have their base of operations outside the United States and beyond the reach of U.S. law.

Before you fund an online casino account with real money, check with your own local jurisdiction regarding the legality of online gaming.

If your local jurisdiction prohibits online gaming with real money, many poker sites still invite you to play with free chips. Of course, all you can win with free chips is more free chips. However, many players take great pride in building massive free chip accounts.



Managing Your Money Online



As we stated, managing your poker bankroll when playing online takes a bit more patience and discipline than when playing in regular brick-and-mortar games. Although it's true that the difference seems small and insignificant, the reality is that playing online feels more like playing a computer game than playing poker for real money against real players. When you're playing with chips and can physically see your stack getting bigger or smaller, you have a sense you're moving actual money. In the online world, the amount of money before you is represented as a dollar figure in a little bubble somewhere on the screen. It takes discipline to manage this bubble as carefully and considerately as you would manage a stack of physical chips.

Here are a few tips for managing your online bankroll:

- Create a separate bank account for your poker bankroll. Determine a fixed amount of money each week that you feel comfortable contributing to your bankroll and don't let yourself deviate from this amount. If it is \$10, contribute this amount each week, whether you are winning or losing. Over time, your bankroll goes through positive and negative fluctuations; if you exhaust your bankroll in a given week, you must wait until your next deposit before you play again. If you cannot maintain this level of discipline with your poker bankroll, you should reconsider playing online for real money.
- Deposit your winnings in your poker bankroll. When you're just starting out, you want to build your bankroll, so you should put your winnings back into your bankroll. Your winnings, combined with your weekly contributions, form your weekly poker budget.
- Do not borrow money to play poker online. If you are not able to fund your own account, play with free chips. Borrowing money to play poker online can lead to developing a gambling debt, which is not how you want to begin your poker-playing career.
- If you find you are having a losing session, stop playing. Do not get into the mental trap of thinking you can simply win back your losses. A good rule of thumb is that you should lose no more than ten times the big bet. For example, if you are playing \$.25/\$.50 limit Hold 'em, you should leave the table if you lose more than \$5.00. Losing streaks happen and you have to be able to recognize and manage them when they come.
- If you are going to play online, pick a site that's offering a sign-up bonus and deposit the minimum amount of money that qualifies for the bonus. Free money is free money and you might as well take advantage of it.
- Play responsibly. If you find your game is too reckless online and you can't contain your desire to play every hand or call every bet, stop playing. Online poker can get expensive quickly if you play recklessly.

caution Despite the fun and popularity of poker, it is still a form of gambling and, as such, can pose a problem for some people. If you find yourself playing too many hours online to the exclusion of other hobbies or interests, consider seeking professional help. Online gambling can be as addictive as other forms of gambling, so don't be afraid to seek help if you feel you need it.



To do list

- Determine what you want in an online poker room
- Learn to evaluate bonus codes and other incentives
- Check out a number of popular online poker rooms

Picking an Online Poker Room

Because of the sophistication of computer software, each day more poker tournaments are offered online than could ever be hosted in brick-and-mortar casinos. For new players in particular, online poker represents an easy, accessible, and unintimidating training ground for acquiring and practicing poker skills.

In the same way that brick-and-mortar casinos differ in theme and gaming experience, so, too, do online poker rooms. In this section, we look at the key features and benefits of some of the most popular online poker rooms and suggest tips for deciding which site is right for you.

Things You'll Need



- Computer
- Internet access

Is This Room Right for You?

What factors should you consider when choosing an online poker room? First and foremost, you want to find a reputable and reliable site that has had some longevity. Because all poker sites are based somewhere outside the United States, it is difficult to obtain much information on the operators of the site, but one clear clue about a site's success is the number of players currently signed on and playing.

You can visit a website called PokerPulse at <http://www.pokerpulse.com> to get up-to-the-minute statistics on how many players are online and at what sites they are playing. Clearly, the greater number of players active on a site, the more likely it is that the site is established or successful. Another clue is whether a site uses celebrity endorsers. More and more, online poker rooms are affiliating with big name

note An online *casino* offers a range of familiar casino games like blackjack, roulette, and slot machines. An online *poker room* just offers poker. In this book, we focus on the features and benefits of online poker rooms.

poker players who are visible on the World Poker Tour or another tournament circuit. It is unlikely that these players would choose to associate their names with fly-by-night or unstable ventures. In fact, one of the lures of several of the major online poker rooms is the chance to play against these professional players. If this is something you would like to try, you might look for that feature when selecting your first site.

Checking out Bonus Codes or Other Incentives

As a lure, many sites compete for new players by giving away money on initial deposits. So, for example, if you decide to open an account with \$100, some sites offer a 20% or 25% sign-on bonus or *bonus code*. The bonus code funds enable you to play with house money while you are learning. In order to get the full bonus, though, you must play a certain number of hands as defined by the site, often within a limited period of time. Carefully read the fine print on the deposit offers so you know exactly what's required to receive the bonus.

Popular Online Poker Sites

To become familiar with the way online poker sites look and function, you can visit a number of them to view their home page, check out their incentives, and otherwise familiarize yourself with their functions. This section looks at some of the more popular online poker rooms.

PartyPoker.com at <http://www.partypoker.com> is perhaps the most well-known and popular poker site, due in large part to its advertising relationship with the World Poker Tour. The PartyPoker.com website is shown in Figure 6.1.

FIGURE 6.1

PartyPoker.com is currently one of the top three online poker sites.

Since coming online in 2001, the site boasts an average of 40,000 players online at any one time and is the home of the PartyPoker.com Million World Poker Tour event with a guaranteed prize pool of more than \$3 million. The site spreads a range of common poker games and offers new players a deposit bonus when they open a

new account. However, they do not offer common game statistics to help you choose a game. If you decide to play on the PartyPoker.com site, you have to estimate the looseness of the game by analyzing the size of the pot, which is listed in the lobby for each game spread (you learn more about this in “Analyzing Game Statistics in the Lobby,” later in this chapter).



PokerStars.com, shown in Figure 6.2, is known as the site where “poker players become world champions” because the 2003 and 2004 World Series of Poker champions won their way into the event through PokerStars.com. With the largest offering of online poker tournaments, PokerStars.com continues to attract poker players who are mainly interested in playing tournaments.

FIGURE 6.2

PokerStars.com is the site that qualified the 2003 and 2004 World Series of Poker champions on their way to victory!

The screenshot shows the PokerStars.com homepage. At the top, it says "Tuesday, December 21". The navigation bar includes "QUICK TOUR", "GETTING STARTED", and "FAQ". Below that are links for "Home", "Poker Room", "Special Features", "Support", "Integrity", "Real Money", "About Us", and "Site Map". The main content area is divided into several sections: "PROMOTIONS" with a notice about the Frequent Player Points (FPP) system; "TOURNAMENTS" with a "CLICK HERE" button and statistics: "4,987 players 798 tables 191 tournneys at 07:44 ET"; "STATISTICS" with news items about "Green Raymer wins the World Series of Poker and \$5,000,000!" and "Chris MoneyMaker wins the World Series of Poker and \$2,500,000!". There is also a "PLAY FOR FREE!" button and a "What are players saying about us?" section.

ParadisePoker.com, shown in Figure 6.3, is one of the oldest and most established Internet poker rooms. The graphics and software are simple and reliable, and the site offers great support by e-mail (but not telephone) if you run into problems.

Like all online poker sites, ParadisePoker.com offers promotions and incentives to draw new players, including various types of first deposit bonuses (see “Checking out Bonus Codes or Other Incentives,” earlier in this chapter). In addition, ParadisePoker.com is one of the best sites for offering game statistics in the lobby for each game spread, as well as offering hand histories and game stats by e-mail. ParadisePoker.com is definitely one of the top five sites in terms of overall traffic, but has a reputation for attracting more experienced players, making the games harder to beat if you’re a new player.

FullTiltPoker.com is one of the newest Internet poker rooms to launch. Nine celebrity poker pros—including Howard “the Professor” Lederer, Chris “Jesus” Ferguson, Phil Ivey, Jennifer Harman, Erick Lindgren, and Andy Bloch—endorse this site, and routinely play there. Because part of the success of this site is dependent on these great players joining in regular games, don’t be surprised to find yourself pitted against one of these world-class pros in a low-limit Hold ‘em game or tournament. The FullTiltPoker.com site is shown in Figure 6.4.

FIGURE 6.3

ParadisePoker.com is one of the first online poker rooms to begin accepting real money wagers.

The screenshot shows the ParadisePoker.com website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links: getting started, why paradise, game info, what's new, support. Below that, a large banner features the text "Poker Action is Always Here" and "24 Hours a Day at the World's Premier Online Poker Room...". To the left, there's a "Click to Play Poker NOW!" button. To the right, there's a "LIVE UPDATE" section and a "\$100,000 GUARANTEED TOURNAMENT!" promotion. Below the main banner, there's a "Welcome to Paradise Poker!" message and a "free download" icon. At the bottom, there's a copyright notice: "Copyright © 1999 - 2004 ParadisePoker.com" and a "CLICK FOR DETAILS" button for the \$1,500,000 Guaranteed promotion.

FIGURE 6.4

FullTiltPoker.com offers players a chance to beat a poker pro.

The screenshot shows the FullTiltPoker.com website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links: HOME, ABOUT US, OUR TEAM, DOWNLOAD, HOW TO PLAY, REAL MONEY, SUPPORT. Below that, a large banner features the text "UP TO \$600" and "CLICK HERE TO PLAY NOW". To the right, there's a "NEWS" section with a headline "CONGRATULATIONS bluestone71". Below the main banner, there's a "PROMOTIONS" section with a "\$600 SIGN UP DEPOSIT BONUS" promotion. At the bottom, there's a "OUR TEAM" section with names like "CHRIS FERGUSON", "PHIL IVEY", and "HOWARD LEDERER".

Empire Poker, shown in Figure 6.5, is a sister site of PartyPoker.com, so together these two sites combine to claim the highest traffic in online poker. Empire Poker (<http://empirepoker.com>) offers many of the same features as the other leading poker sites, including good game statistics, deposit bonuses, and other promotions. The games spread are limited to variations of Hold 'em, Omaha, and Seven Card Stud, but the site does offer numerous tournaments, including *freeroll tournaments* that cost nothing to enter but offer cash prizes.

UltimateBet.com is also one of the newer sites featuring a unique option called a mini view of the player table. *Mini views* are attractive if you are playing on multiple tables because they enable you to see all your game tables on an average-sized computer monitor. UltimateBet.com (<http://ultimatebet.com>) is endorsed by two of

the biggest names in professional poker: Phil Helmuth and Annie Duke. Annie Duke is most well known for having won the 2004 World Series of Poker Tournament of Champions event. She is considered one of the leading female poker players in the world and hosts a monthly freeroll tournament where players earn entry by accumulating points playing on her UltimateBet.com \$4/\$8 Texas Hold'em table. UltimateBet.com's home page is shown in Figure 6.6.

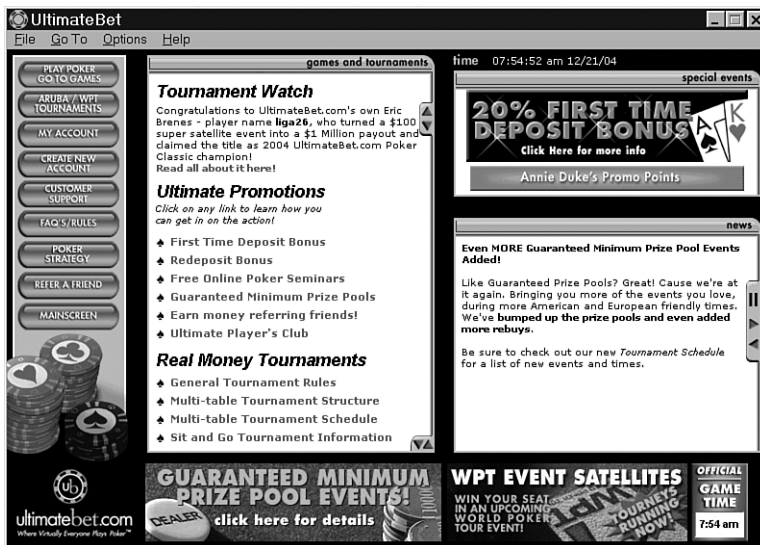
FIGURE 6.5

Empire Poker and its sister site, PartyPoker.com, share the same network but have different skins, or looks and feels.



FIGURE 6.6

UltimateBet.com lets you play against two of the world's most successful professional poker players—Phil Helmuth and Annie Duke.





To do list

- Set up an online poker account
- Select a poker game
- Analyze the game's statistics
- Choose a table
- Buy in to the game
- Use the site's action buttons, charts, notes, hand histories, and player stats

Playing Your First Game

There are three common parts to an online poker site:

- The poker room website home page
- The player lobby
- The game table

The poker site's *home page* is the first place you visit to review the features of the poker software, download the software to your computer, and read about current promotions. Many poker sites' home pages offer tips and strategies for playing online and basic fundamentals of how to play the most popular versions of poker.

If you decide you want to take a closer look at the site's software, you can download the client application to your computer. Most poker applications are small files that self-install and configure after you download them to your hard drive.

tip Most poker sites require you to play on a relatively fast computer with a high-speed Internet connection. Check the system requirements posted on the website before you go through the effort of downloading the free software.

Things You'll Need



- Downloaded site software
- Credit card or intermediary payment site, if playing for real money
- Computer and Internet access

Setting up an Account

After you download the software to your computer, you need to open a player account. If you plan to stick with play money, you don't need to provide too much information beyond coming up with a player name or screen name.

Many players opt for playing with play chips instead of real money. With play chips, you never have to worry about how much you're winning or losing.



However, if you intend to open a real money account, the startup process is a bit more involved. Because an increasing number of credit card companies are concerned about the vague legalities surrounding online gaming and do not want to be held responsible for players' losses, they are erring on the side of caution and simply not permitting their customers to use their credit card services to purchase gaming chips for online gambling.

So, players must use an intermediary site, such as FirePay or NetTeller, that acts as an online wallet for your money. You can transfer money from your bank account or credit card to one of these intermediary accounts and then to your online gaming account. The reverse process works as well. If you win money at an online poker room, you can cash out to your intermediary wallet, which you can then have credited back to your bank account or credit card.

The whole process is fairly efficient; many people prefer using an intermediary money transfer site rather than directly entering a credit card when making purchases on the Internet. If you would like to use one of these services to fund your online account, follow the instructions on the poker site.

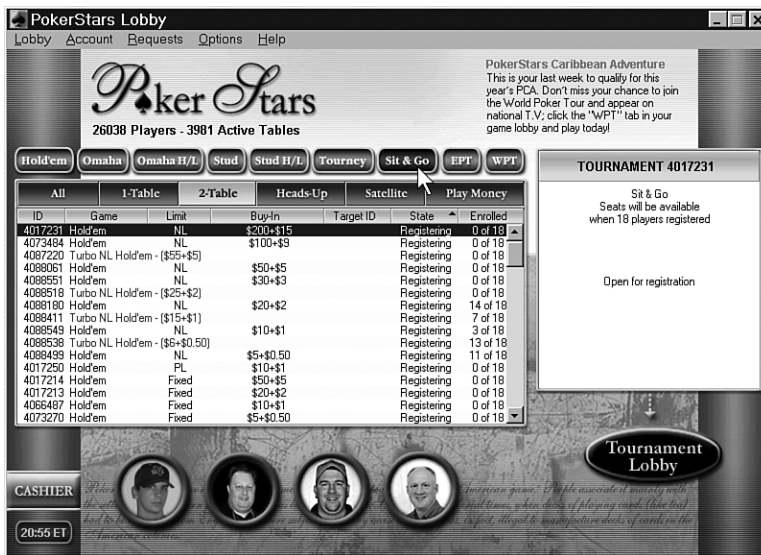
Selecting a Game

After you install the poker application on your computer and launch the program, you automatically connect to the player lobby. Here is where you can see all the games that are currently spread, or offered, and the number of players at each table. Figure 6.7 shows the lobby for PokerStars.com.

tip When picking a screen name for an online poker site, keep in mind that this is the first thing other players see when you join a table. Some online poker players believe you should pick a screen name that suggests you don't know how to play poker all that well, like "pknewbie" or "ihavnoclu," because it might encourage other players to call more of your bets, thus building bigger pots. Some men choose names that sound feminine, like "BunnyGirl" or "SweetLips," in an attempt to play off the stereotype that women are weaker poker players than men (which we know is just that, a stereotype!). The bottom line is that screen names can be deceiving, so don't assume you're playing against a little old lady with gray hair just because her screen name is "GrandmaAces."

FIGURE 6.7

Here is the lobby for PokerStars.com, a leading online poker room. As you can see, there are about 26,000 active players logged on, playing on more than 3,900 tables!



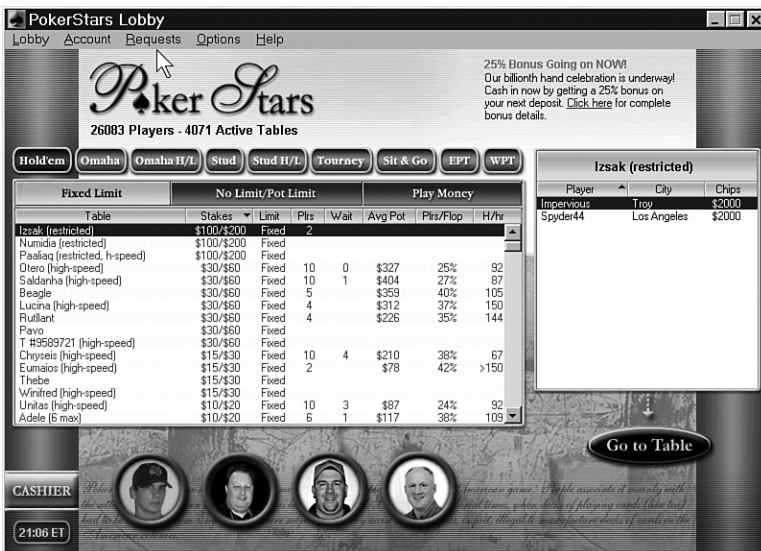
In the PokerStars.com site shown here, the games currently underway are detailed in green balloons across the top and include Hold 'em, Omaha, Stud, and others, as well as events for the European Poker Tour (EPT) and World Poker Tour (WPT).

Analyzing Game Statistics in the Lobby

After you decide what game you would like to play, you click on the tab to see the various games being spread or the stake amounts for that game. Figure 6.8 shows the partial view of the current spread for fixed-limit Texas Hold 'em.

FIGURE 6.8

After clicking the Hold 'em tab, you can see that there are Fixed-Limit games, No-Limit/Pot-Limit games and Play Money games underway.



For Fixed-Limit Poker (the tab selected in this sample shot), you can see that the highest spread-limit game with two players is \$100/\$200. That means the first two bets and raises are in exactly \$100 increments and the last two bets or raises are in exactly \$200 increments. The first full game with 10 players is \$30/\$60. As you look across the row for each game, you can see the average pot size and the average number of players that are seeing the flop. These are good measurements to estimate how tight or loose the game is (see Chapter 2 for more information about playing and betting styles). Roughly speaking, in flop games, like Texas Hold 'em, the more players that see the flop, the looser the game and the tighter you should play your cards. If you play only the best starting hands when everyone is playing good, marginal, and weak starting hands, you're likely to win more pots.

In Stud games where there is no concept of a flop, the lobby lists the average number of players staying until Fourth Street. Again, this is just a rough measurement of the game's looseness. The more players staying until the later betting rounds, the looser the game, and the tighter you should play.

The last statistic that is commonly seen in a game's lobby description is the number of hands per hour. This statistic gauges how slow or fast the hands are played. If you like a fast game with many hands per hour, you should look for a table that offers a high hand-to-hour ratio.

Seeing game statistics is a major benefit to playing online because it helps you pick a game that suits your particular playing style. If you're a beginner and willing to play with real money, look for small-limit tables where the percentage of players seeing the flop is 50%–60%. This suggests loose players who are playing too many hands. Be sure not to fall into the same trap. Stick to your premium starting hand standards. That way, you increase your chances of winning the pots where you're most likely starting with the best hand.

tip Better players tend to have more rigorous starting hand standards and thus see fewer flops. If you analyze a game's statistics in the lobby, you should notice that in flop games like Hold 'em and Omaha, fewer players see the flop as betting limits go higher, because more players fold in the first betting round. In lower limit games, which attract less experienced players, more players stay to see the flop.

caution Keep in mind that even when you're playing online, the same basic rules of poker apply. The hand that starts strong usually finishes strong.

note Not all online poker rooms list game statistics like those shown in the PokerStars.com example. If you find these stats helpful when selecting a game, look for a poker site that includes the information on the lobby screen.

Buying in to the Poker Table

After you select a game and a table, you double-click on the game to be transported to the actual poker table. When there, you see a bubble showing the available seats. By clicking on an open seat, you are buying in to the game. The software manages your bankroll, converts your dollars to chips, and lets you know when it is your turn to play. In Hold 'em games where there are blind bets, you might have to wait a hand or two to start playing. In Stud games, where there is an ante, you can usually start playing the very next hand. Figure 6.9 shows the poker table for a high-limit Hold 'em game.

FIGURE 6.9

Here, you see an example of a full \$30/\$60 limit Hold 'em table on PokerStars.com. The player in seat seven has bet \$30, presumably on his kings.



Using the Action Buttons

In order to speed up the game, many sites offer players *action buttons*, such as Fold, Call, and Raise, that you can click to tell the computer what you intend to do when play comes to you. Figure 6.10 shows an example of the various action buttons you can use to preset your betting action.

Some online players believe that by using these buttons you can tip off other players to the strength of your hand. If the raise comes quickly, it might suggest you have already decided you have a strong hand and clicked the Raise action button. The same is true for the Call button when you are just trying to limp into the hand. I like using action buttons when I am clearly going to fold. I am more conservative about using the buttons when I am about to bet or raise the pot.

FIGURE 6.10

Action buttons, like those in the lower-right of this screen, help speed the play of the game but can also reveal a weak hand.



Using Additional Online Features

Every online poker site has a slightly different look and feel and you should noodle around on various sites to find the one you like the best. If you like a lot of colors and graphics, go for a site that lets you change the look of the table and lobby. If you like a clean and simple site, go for one of the older poker sites where the graphics are not quite as glitzy.

One of the other nice features about playing online is the ability to see the exact size of the pot calculated and displayed over the table. Make sure you toggle on this option when you sit down in a game. This way you can roughly estimate pot odds without having to count bets. Naturally, if you are going to have to bet \$5 to win a \$2 pot and you are drawing to make a statistical longshot hand, such as a straight or a flush, it is easy to see that the pot odds do not justify calling the bet. Because the computer manages all the pot calculations, playing online makes doing poker math just a bit easier than playing in a live-action casino where you have to count the bets in your head and estimate your pot odds against your drawing odds. (For a more detailed discussion of pot odds, see Chapter 2.)

Using Charts and Notes

For beginning players, many online sites offer mini poker lessons or strategy pages right on their website. As you might imagine, it would be hard to sit down in a brick-and-mortar poker room or casino and bring out cheat sheets to remind you of the hand rankings or odds for drawing to a particular hand, but not so in an online game. It is not uncommon for online players to have all kinds of odds and probability charts and tips posted around their computers. When you're just learning poker,



you should consider doing this as well. At the minimum, you should keep the hand rankings available until you know them by heart. This book's tearout card offers these and other useful tools.

Online poker sites also enable you to take notes on other players—while you are playing them! You can remind yourself if an opponent called an all-in bet with an oddball hand, suggesting they might be an inexperienced player. You can make notes on how much players have won or lost in a session to keep track of their win percentage. If you see a player consistently winning big hands at showdown, you might be less inclined to go heads-up against that player unless you feel confident you can beat a big hand. Taking notes on players can improve your play by helping you keep track of loose and aggressive players you meet along the way in cyberspace. Because your player notes are stored on your own hard drive, you can use the space to write anything you think useful.

Reviewing Hand Histories and Player Statistics

One new feature offered by many poker sites is the ability to retrieve hand histories and player statistics. For any game, you can request a hand history be emailed to you so you can review how you and your opponents bet, raised, or folded each hand. Some sites allow you to even instantly replay the last hand to see step-by-step what happened in each betting round. Hand histories can be instructive if you are just learning to play poker because they provide a running record of how you bet your starting hands. Additionally, there are several poker software programs that let players upload hand histories for analysis. If you carefully keep track of these statistics over time, you can gain greater insight into weaknesses in your own game and work to correct them.

Most online sites also include a feature called *player stats*. As shown in Figure 6.11, the player chat, notes, stat, and game info features are accessed directly beneath the player table. Player stats are a useful snapshot of your present play.

Poker sites that offer player stats also offer a brief description of how to interpret the stats. For the most part, because they represent only a brief snapshot of your play and are fairly dependent on how other players in the game are also playing, it is hard to draw too many conclusions.

tip

The most useful stat in Hold'em games is the percent of times you see the flop and from what position. If this number is greater than what's shown for the table as a whole on the lobby screen, you are probably seeing too many hands and should tighten up your play. For Stud games, a similar useful stat is the percentage of times you see Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Streets. Again, if these percentages are high, you are probably playing too many hands.

FIGURE 6.11

Each time you log on to a site, a new stat session starts, though at anytime you can reset your stats to zero. You might decide to do this if you register for a tournament and want to collect stats on just that single tournament session.



Protecting Yourself from Collusion and Cheating Online

One of the more common concerns about playing poker over the Internet is being cheated, either by other players or by the online poker site itself. Because most Internet poker sites track every hand, it is not hard to go back and retrace the hand history for a particular game or player. The most common form of cheating in online poker rooms is when two or more players reveal their hole cards to each other by phone, pager, or instant messenger. Knowing the hole cards of other players at the table gives you a small statistical advantage over players that do not have the same information.

Colluders also work together to make bigger pots by raising and reraising until opponents fold. Online poker rooms commonly are alerted to collusion when two players always play at the same table. No reputable online poker site wants to be known as a site where cheaters get away with scamming players. Most of the bigger online poker rooms are on the lookout for cheaters and do not hesitate to kick a player off the network or freeze a bankroll if collusion is suspected.

With such risks for cheaters, it is unlikely they would waste their time trying to cheat anything lower than a \$4/\$8 or \$5/\$10 game because it just wouldn't be financially worthwhile. For the most part, if you plan to play online in relatively low limits, you should not be too concerned about players colluding. However, if you do suspect

note Poker cheaters can crop up anywhere. Even in regular brick-and-mortar card rooms, players are always on the lookout for two or more opponents working together to exchange card information, either by hand or verbal signals.

you're at a table with cheats, don't hesitate to move to a new table and send an e-mail to the poker site reporting the players involved.

CASHING OUT?



In the early days of online poker, when sites went belly-up, most of the time your online bankroll followed suit. It is in the best interest of the poker site to pay promptly and efficiently, however, so losing an online bankroll this way is less of a concern today, at least for those playing on top sites. Poker message boards are numerous and it is simply too easy for poker players to spread the word among the online poker community that a particular site is delaying or unnecessarily holding up cash outs (cash payments).

Keep in mind that online poker is, indeed, big business and the goal of these sites is to offer a great online poker experience so you'll keep coming back to play often and play big! Customer service, prompt cash outs, and overall game security are important to most online players, so expect nothing less from whatever site you decide to try.

Spotting Online Tells

When playing online poker, you can't see your opponents, so it's much harder to gauge what poker hands they might be holding, based on visual clues or *tells*. However, experienced online poker players have identified certain poker tells that are unique to online poker:

- The use of action buttons can sometimes offer clues about the strength of an opponent's hand. If I have a good hand, I might check the Raise Any action button, so the computer will make the play very quickly when it is my turn to act. If another player calls your bet extremely quickly, you might also assume that player has a strong hand and is using his Call Any action button.
- The reverse is also true. If players take an unusually long time to make a play or decide what to do, they might be on a weak hand. Hesitation, even in brick-and-mortar games, often suggests drawing hands or even weakness.
- Many players like to use the Check/Fold action button and this is perhaps the biggest tip off for detecting weak hands. If players check extremely quickly, they most likely have used the action button. If you bet, you will see hands folded just as quickly.
- In online poker, you see the same player styles discussed in Chapter 2,

tip Great online poker players know how to vary their play and mix up their betting action to purposely make their betting patterns hard to predict. As a rule, don't use the action buttons for betting except for folding or posting your antes or blinds.

including loose/aggressive players that try to dominate the table. Aggressively raising and reraising the pot is a common tactic to induce weaker players into folding. Stick to the starting hand standards described in earlier chapters and you'll be in position to come over the top with the better hand.

Summary

With thousands of poker players logging in to online poker rooms from all corners of the world, it is not surprising to learn that playing poker over the Internet is the fastest growing segment of the poker industry. As more new players are drawn to the game of poker, online poker rooms represent an accessible and convenient practice ground where more hands are dealt per hour than could ever be possible in a brick-and-mortar card room. What's more, online poker connects players like never before, making it easy and hassle free to find an active poker game any time of the day or night, whether you're looking to play with real money or just for fun with play chips. Just be careful, though, if you decide to play for real money, as the ease and comfort of playing in your own home and the range and accessibility of online games can mesmerize you. Be sure to play responsibly if you do decide to ante up real money in any one of the growing number of online poker rooms.