



## **Chapter 7**

# **Online Poker and the Individuals Who Play It**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of the Internet has started to transform society along various dimensions. While news regarding the way the Internet is affecting business captures headlines on a daily basis, its impact on various aspects of day-to-day life also cannot be ignored. In particular, the Internet has had a clear impact on the way people spend their leisure time. For example, people (users) spend substantial amounts of time online trying to find the cheapest airline tickets to our favorite destinations, booking hotels and rental cars, etc. Users are also spending greater amounts of time shopping for everything from clothing to groceries to cars online.

Increasingly, one of the key activities that users are engaging in during their leisure time is the exploration of or participation in one or more of the many forms of online entertainment options available. Examples of these online activities include reading books and magazines, listening to music, listening to radio and TV broadcasts, engaging in chat room conversations etc. The list of online entertainment options available is truly mind boggling. Add to this the fact that a number of these activities require a relatively low amount of monetary investment by the user (usually none) and you have a very potent mechanism that is shaping the future of society.

One of the most popular categories of online entertainment options available to users is games. Every major portal has a games section where players can engage in games ranging from resurrected versions of popular computer-based games such as Hangman, Tetris, Solitaire, etc., to TV-style

games such as Jeopardy and Wheel of Fortune. These sites also feature intellectually challenging games such as chess and crossword puzzles. However, it can be argued (based on sheer number and variety) that the largest category within online games is casino-style games. Part of this popularity might be attributed somewhat to the growth of gambling and casinos in the US (Davis, 1992). According to the final report of the National Gambling Impact Study Commission (1999), casinos operate in 28 states. These include casinos in Nevada, Atlantic City, and approximately 100 riverboat casinos and 260 Indian casinos. The growth in the number of on-line casinos also might be a reason for the popularity of casino-style games on the web (Barry, 1998). For example, a search on Yahoo resulted in 295 on-line casinos being listed ([www.yahoo.com/games](http://www.yahoo.com/games)).

Typical of the casino-style games supported on web sites are different versions of slot machines, roulette, blackjack, craps etc. All these games have the following common features: a) they are pure games of chance, and b) they pit the individual player against the house (which in this case is the computer). Thus, the actions of other individuals are irrelevant to the outcome of the game. Most of these sites also support Video Poker, which also pits a player against a machine. However, very few of these sites support “true” poker games, i.e., games that pit a group of players against each other. The lack of “live” poker games on web sites is not really surprising considering that of all the games played in a casino, poker is arguably the one game where being able to see an opponent’s mannerisms is critical to the way the game is played. Also, a poker game (unlike the other games listed) cannot be played without a minimum number of opponents being available. In this sense it is similar to a chat room in that its viability depends on the existence of a strong base of customers.

Is it possible to support poker games that require participation from multiple players across the Internet? What kind of infrastructure will be needed to support such a game? Is such a game sustainable over the long run? How will individual players perceive online games compared to live poker games in terms of other players’ skill level, commitment to the game etc.? In order to answer these questions, we studied two of the most popular forms of the game currently supported on the Internet: Internet Relay Chat (IRC)-based poker and e-mail-based poker.

In this chapter, we trace the evolution of the two types of online poker games, characterize the players who play them and examine the reasons for the success of both these online games. The data and observations presented in the chapter are based on: a) personal observations, b) comments from players in response to open-ended questions posed online, and c) a survey that

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