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IS HIGH-TECH POKER CHEATING **REAL?**

By Richard Marcus

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After hearing about high-tech cheating in online poker games, investigators began engineering byplay accounts. Then came cameras. Now, cameras are now believed to be intelligence into strategy, attacking security codes which criminals wash away. But what about our rooms? Are they safe? How would they use against unsuspecting players?

Well, two years ago it appeared that they were safe. Other than some weak and rather unprofessional attempts to use hidden computers to track played cards (especially in Stud games) and calculate playing and betting strategies with that knowledge, nothing much about sophisticated technology was heard through the real-world poker-cheating grapevine. But that began to change in 2005. In September of that year a woman playing three-card poker at the Mint

Casino in London, England, aroused suspicion while winning at an exorbitant rate 34 of 44 hands that is highly unlikely at that game. The same woman had been noted winning at similar rates in other London casinos offering three-card poker. Another thing Mint security officials observed that related to her previous wins at the other casinos was a white van parked in the proximity of the Mint's front entrance.

An immediate on-site investigation was launched, and the woman was found to be wearing a harness on her arm that housed a tiny digital micro-camera, all of which were covered by her sleeve. Sitting in the back of the van outside, officers found a computer "techie" hunched over two computer screens. One was for the live feed, the other to play the recordings of what the woman's hidden micro-camera was filming inside the casino: the cards coming off the dealer's pack as he dealt them facedown to the players and himself. By positioning her arm on a downward slope from the dealer's hands as he dealt, the woman's camera was able to film the cards' faces. Back in the van, the techie slowed down the digital images on the screen and perfectly read the cards. He then relayed the info back to the woman

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and a man at the table, also an accomplice, through the hidden earpieces they wore. The two cheating players then played their hands, having an enormous edge on the casino.

True, three-card poker is not poker, but it is a step closer to it than say blackjack or roulette. The game is certainly a poker derivative. But if this incident were not enough to make you wary about possible goings-on in our brick and mortar cardrooms, less than two years later, back in July, we learned of another frighteningly high-tech scam that was indeed poker, if not in a brick and mortar public cardroom. It was, however, in a brick and mortar *room*.

Of course I am referring to the high-stakes private game scam in the Borgata Hotel in Atlantic City, which took place just before the start of the Borgata Open, Atlantic City's preeminent poker tournament. For those of you unfamiliar with the details, it happened in a luxury Borgata hotel suite that was rigged with digital cameras in the walls. These cameras filmed players' hole cards while they peeked at them rather than when the cards came off the dealer's deck. In place of the van used in London's three-card poker scam was the hotel room next door to the suite. That's where two techies viewed the film work on laptop screens and relayed the info to their cohorts playing in the high-stakes game through the earpieces they wore.

It was very similar to the London scam inasmuch as digital film and radio equipment were used to film cards that were supposed to be unseen and transmit that information back to the table. In fact, rumors circulated and still persist that there was more to the Borgata scam than was released by the New Jersey Casino Control Commission, and therefore the press. This scam was not made public until early July, a month after it allegedly got busted. Why? Early reports claimed that the scam was directly connected to the Borgata Open and was in commission while the tournament was taking place. The natural supposition in that case was that the big tournament players' hole cards were being secretly filmed and that information given to a syndicate of tournament cheaters lined up against them at the tables.

Whether or not this is true and a cover-up is in place to protect the integrity of big-time tournament play doesn't really matter. The fact is that high-tech cheating has arrived in brick and mortar poker and you need to be aware of it, because in the future it will grow.

There are perhaps half a dozen professional teams working with micro-cameras across the world, but that number is about to increase. They operate in a similar fashion to the London three-card poker team. Filming players' hole cards in a public cardroom scenario is generally too difficult if not impossible altogether. The problem is that in spite of the most sophisticated miniature digital camera equipment, cheaters still have to get the right angle and viewpoint of players' hole cards to film them. Most poker players are already sufficiently wary of

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this. They naturally protect their hole cards while peeking at them, in most cases keeping them adequately hidden from any eyes lurking behind, either human or those man-made and fitted into optic lenses. Unless cheaters had some kind of tiny periscope hidden somewhere in the cushion of every player spot on the table, effective filming of hole cards would not be viable.

But filming the faces of the cards coming off the deck during the deal that's a different story. This can be done with a master's proficiency. Just like the London trio filmed the cards coming off the deck at the three-card poker table, a cheating team can very accurately gauge the angles necessary

to accomplish the same feat at the Texas Hold'em and 7-card Stud tables. Of course particular dealers would either inadvertently aid or hinder the efficiency achieved by the cheaters, but there are many dealers out there who, from the right angles, consistently expose enough of the downward spiraling cards' faces to the tiny lenses up someone's sleeve or hidden in a woman's open handbag.

Here's the scenario to watch out for, or I should say to be aware of because it's very difficult to see even if you're watching for it. But you never know you just might see something to clue you in. Ideally, the high-tech team will have two people with hidden micro-cameras on the table. This is not always possible due to playing conditions at any given moment, but if the team is patient they will not only get their cameramen to the game but into the positions best suited for their covert operation. Generally, those positions are the 2 and 3 seats to the dealers' left and the 8 and 9 seats to their right. These positions supply the cameras with the best angles and the optimum fields of vision determined by the distances that the cards travel from the top of the deck on their way to the felt in front of the players. The cameras will nearly always miss several cards, especially those dealt to the players in the 1 and 10 seats because of the shorter distance; but in all cases they will pick up more than enough cards to give the cheaters a monster edge in the game.

As demonstrated by the three-card poker scam, the images will be slowed down by a computer program and read clearly on monitors, then relayed back to players at the table who are wearing invisible audio devices in their ears. In most cases, the two players filming the cards will be the only team members in the game: There would be no inherent profit in having a third player, unless, of course, the team wanted to get into added collusion play (they're already playing in collusion) with another hand to participate in the whipsawing that sucks more money into pots. But the third player really is not necessary and would probably reduce the overall profit, because in a ten-handed game they would have three dead seats (their own money) instead of two.

If you think this type of cheating would completely run over a Hold'em game, you're right. But consider what it would do to a Stud game! How many hands are decided on that river card dealt face down? And dealers tend to be more deliberate in their delivery of that last card to each remaining player,

which gives the cameras an even bigger window in which to catch its image.

If you're wondering about tournaments, the threat of high-tech cheating is decidedly less, regardless of what may have happened at the Borgata Open. Firstly, and especially in No Limit events, players often risk getting knocked out in a single hand. This would nullify whatever chips they had won up to that point since there would, of course, be none left, and only the loss of entrance and rebuy fees would stand.

Secondly, tournaments are much more scrutinized by cardroom personnel, and many of them are already being filled by cameras that are *supposed* to be there. Imagine the scandal that would brew if the network cameras discovered the illicit ones! And thirdly, as there are always high-stakes cash games going on during all the major tournaments, it is much more profitable for the high-tech cheaters to join their low-tech counterparts in these games. So in short, don't worry much about high-tech tournament cheating unless someone is using isotope imaging to mark the cards.

Isotope imaging... what did I say! Is that another high-tech cheating formula coming

to brick and mortar poker? Not exactly, but there are high-tech card marking schemes in the works. Can you guess what they entail? Well, if there's one technology that's on the cutting edge of just about everything, naturally it would be that same technology to take poker cheating to new heights in the coming years. Of course I'm talking about lasers.

We've already heard about laser scanners in cell phones used to predict where roulette balls will land. Several of these scams have proliferated, the most famous of which is the Ritz Roulette Scam in 2004, where another trio of two men and a woman beat a bunch of London casinos out of \$3 million. The next step in laser cheating technology is going to revolutionize marking cards at poker tables. Forget all that invisible and disappearing daub that is the avant-garde method of today's advanced card-markers.

Within a few years we will see, or at least suffer unknowingly, the effects of tiny laser pens that card-markers will use to shoot beams onto the backs of their hole cards, which will result in tiny discolorations that can only be seen with special lenses and from certain angles. As we are already fa-

miliar with laser-engraving technology for marking everything from retail bar codes to paper, wood and plastic products, the transformation to covertly marking the backs of playing cards is just over the horizon. And these laser guns will be made to look like the normal assortment of objects players routinely surround themselves and their chips with at poker tables.

Are there any other nefarious high-tech gadgets in the works to cheat you out of your money in brick and mortar poker games? You bet. The only problem is that I don't yet know what they are. But as soon as I do, I will let you know. I can tell you one thing now, however. The high-tech cheaters out there are more determined than ever. They will go to great lengths to develop products and strategies to remove you from your money. Don't panic, though just remain vigilant. Like in any poker game, if you get the feeling that something not kosher is going on, just get up and go find another game. Don't hang around trying to figure out if someone at the table is filming the deals or "beaming" the cards. It might be too difficult. ♠