



# Mice Heist

Is there any way to stop online poker cheating and abuse?

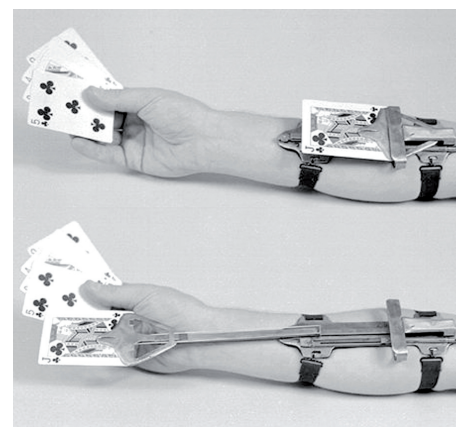
By Richard Marcus

**B**ack in the spring of 2006, I published a very controversial book called *Dirty Poker, the Poker Underworld Exposed*. Much of its contents were given to discussions about a topic not many people in the poker world wanted to hear about: cheating at online poker. I had carefully gathered material by way of exhaustive research and firsthand accounts given to me by people privy to all aspects relating to online security issues. It was readily evident that many of the most serious abuses to gaming integrity occurred in this form of poker.

For the views I expressed in this book, which were backed up by statistical evidence, I was severely criticised by some and called outright insane by others. These attacks on my credibility were launched mainly because of two statements

I made in the book. One was that dishonest players working from either within or outside online poker sites were cheating by manipulating source codes and software programs to see their opponents' hole cards. The other was that the use of poker-playing bots, collusion play among players with and without bots, and flagrant multi-accounting and selling would all proliferate—and even threaten the very existence of online poker—if not somehow kept in check. I even made the statement in an interview with MSN that was widely distributed over the internet that if things didn't change rapidly, online poker could “go the way of dinosaurs within a decade”.

Well, funny things started happening last year, starting in September. And as each one occurred, I looked less and less like a senseless



↑ Poker cheating has become a lot more high-tech.





↑ It's extremely hard to detect a lot of online poker cheating due to the muddled way this gaming is regulated.

lunatic. The first major incident was what is now known as the 'Absolute Poker Scam'. An employee of the company using 'superaccounts' hacked its online poker software and compromised the integrity of Absolute's entire poker system, through which he devised a sophisticated scheme to manipulate internal systems to access third-party computers and accounts to view hole cards of other customers during play without their knowledge.

Just weeks after that, we began hearing of more disturbing online poker scams. These brought us familiarity to the online scams now called 'multi-accounting' and 'account selling'. Multi-accounting is when one person uses more than one account during an online poker tournament, which gives him a large unfair advantage. Josh Field, an underage online poker wunderkind, was recently banned for life by PokerStars for this infraction. Another version of this scam is when two or more people use three or more accounts, usually lots more, then add collusion play to their illegal arsenal. Account-selling is another online poker tournament 'crime' where one player sells out his account

to a stronger player while the tournament is in progress, usually near the end. This practice gives the advantage to the usually highly skilled player buying the account, as his opponents are unfamiliar with his play and betting style, and he is then cloaked in the newly acquired anonymity.

Then there is 'ghosting', another form of illegal play where players in tournaments receive help and advice from other people via numerous means of online and telephone communication. Although this is one of the lesser infractions known to online poker, it is still against the rules, and those participating in it often graduate to higher and more serious forms of online cheating. If all this isn't bad enough, there are even websites that sell these types of services to inexperienced tournament players or those who have sudden lapses in their confidence.

So, how do poker sites stop all this? Can they stop it in the first place?

It is difficult. The first important proprietary action was PokerStars' banning of Josh Field for life. Though some people felt that penalty was a bit harsh, it does serve as an example that online sites are not going to take it anymore. >>



↑ Sorel Mizzi got caught purchasing a Full Tilt account.

*The temptation to give advice when you have money on the line is always high.*





↑ Nobody knows whether the proven cases of online poker cheating are merely just the tip of the iceberg.

I, for one, think their action will serve as a pretty good deterrent to those bent on abusing the system.

However, due to the nature of tournaments being online, it's in the case where one person takes over for another player in the middle of a tournament when one's connection goes down. But the contradiction is that there is really no way for online poker sites to know if someone bought an account or if the person is taking over because of connectivity issues.

When well-known online player Sorel Mizzi was banned from Full Tilt Poker for purchasing an account, he really only got caught because he tried to cover it up. The original winner, Chris Vaughn (the ex-editor of *Bluff* magazine who lost his job because of the scandal), took full credit for the win, but if he had from the beginning said his connection went down and then called Mizzi, who took over for him while relaying information over the phone, he probably would never have been banned.

Even though multi-accounting and account-selling are clearly cheating, there is a thin line between what is and isn't considered cheating by the online poker sites, at least in the sense of which infractions result in players who committed them being banned and which don't.

In my opinion, the major online poker sites need to conduct some security-driven 'collusion' of their own before any real progress can be made to stop all the abuse. If they can get together and clearly define what constitutes serious online cheating, then they can all move forward together to combat it. Naturally, offenses like hacking and internal fraud are serious infractions and must result in instant expulsion.

Other less flagrant fouls such as ghosting could perhaps be 'permitted' simply because online sites may, unfortunately, have to accept the fact that deep in tournaments many players often get advice from players much better than themselves. And then there is the prevalence of online tournament players being staked by other players who might be better at tournament play than they are, which creates more 'multiple player' seats when those superior players start giving advice to their 'horses' as they have an economic interest in their results. While there's no doubt that many players do this, even those among them who are ethical people, the temptation to give advice when you have money on the line is always high.

There is one final element to online poker that should be discussed when it comes to abusing it:

data mining. This is the instance of either paying a service to collect player data on tables that you aren't sitting at, or the act of using software that automatically opens and closes tables for you while you're absent. Is this another form of abuse? In my opinion it is. Players using information that they have not obtained from being directly in online poker games goes against fair play. PokerStars, seemingly always at the positive forefront of online integrity issues, agrees and is one of the few sites that specifically states that data mining is against its terms of service. But aside from PokerStars making it difficult to get hand histories from tables you're not playing at, data mining is nearly impossible to hinder.

I think there are certainly limitations to the realities of keeping online poker completely secure, although we are definitely learning from having witnessed the recent string of major abuses. If online gaming were better regulated, it would be a much easier task to implement uniform standards, safeguards and detection methods, the result of which would be to make a lot of these issues of online abuse and cheating go away.

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