

Chapter 1

Creating a Winning Combination: Poker, the Internet, and You

In This Chapter

- ▶ Winning cold, hard cash (or maybe soft, electronic cash)
 - ▶ Understanding the differences between the real and cyber worlds
 - ▶ Assembling the necessary hardware, software, and poker knowledge
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The online poker boom has been astounding. At the end of 2004, at any given moment, more than 10,000 players were competing on over 150 poker sites. On any given day, combined bets totaled more than \$130 million. And the numbers keep going up.

And not surprisingly, not all the new attendees play poker well. Sure, you have to watch out for some sharks, hustlers, and poker savants; but the misfits, slackers, and the terminally distracted greatly outnumber the dangerous players. In online play in general, and especially at the lower-limit tables, you have the potential to make *a lot* of money.

In this chapter, we talk about the basics of Internet poker, as well as the raw materials you need to play a truly fascinating form of America's favorite card game (and recently, America's favorite game, period).

And the rest of the book? Well, we talk about everything else there.

Me, Winning on the Internet? You Bet!

In case you're confused by the title of the book, we should get one thing clear from the start: Yes, you *can* win money playing poker on the Internet. Recognizing that, however, doesn't make it easy. Even if you've "mastered" brick-and-mortar play, you can't simply walk in and take the candy from all the Net brats. You come screen to screen with some pretty tough players. Heck, Net dwellers have won the past two World Series of Poker Main Events in Las Vegas. But coming out on top of your favorite game is certainly possible, and to do that you need to know your poker theory and have money to put on the virtual table.



The most important thing to understand about Internet poker is that you're still playing poker.

Knowing your poker theory

With very few exceptions, nearly all the poker theory you already know and have gleaned over your life applies in the Internet world. You must deal with nuances and fine points, yes (and you can bet that we cover those in detail, such as in Chapter 3), but poker is poker, no matter the form or forum.

If you're looking for general poker theory, you can't find much of it here (with the exception of single-table tournaments on demand, which we cover in Chapters 12 and 13), but you can find the info in books like *Poker For Dummies* (Wiley). If you aren't familiar with the nuances of poker itself, you should read and study up on general theory first before you play with any hard currency online.

In any betting situation, the basis to making money is being more informed than your opponent. If you ignore reading up on poker theory, the players who aren't so cavalier *will* beat you in the long run.



If you're not completely up on poker theory, don't let it stop you from getting started. You can always play for free chips, which we talk about in Chapter 8. In fact, you can also play in *free-roll* tournaments, where you pay nothing and still have a chance to win hard currency (check out Chapter 10).

Just like real money, but faster

Yes, the money you play for online is the real deal. That's the good news, of course. The bad news is you can lose real money as well.

Because of the speed of computer play, a full Internet table goes through more than twice as many hands per hour than the brick-and-mortar equivalent. That means you can expect your money swings to be twice as big on the Net: If you play a winning strategy, you win twice as fast; if you play a losing strategy, you watch your money walk away at double the speed.

Chapter 8 goes into detail about easing into money play online with *micro-limit* (small-limit) games. We talk more about the ramifications of speed in Chapters 3 and 5.

Dealing with the dough

In order to win money, you have to throw in a few bucks yourself. Such is the law of the land when it comes to poker (except for those extra-special free-roll tournaments). So before you can play for hard currency online, you have to get money to your poker site — which can scare some people silly. We first want to tell you: You have safe outlets to get your money online . . . and safe ways get it out again. The most common mechanism for money transfer is through electronic payment services that you connect directly to your bank account. You can write an electronic check as well. For more information about all things green, see Chapter 4.

If you don't want to lose a lot of cash while you learn, we recommend free-chip games and free-roll tournaments as tools to get you up to speed. (See Chapters 8 and 10.) But only play these forms of "poker" to get used to the Internet and to get familiar with a particular game. When you're comfortable playing at these levels, make sure you move on.



If you play too long with no potential for loss, you're bound to develop some bad poker habits, which we also cover in Chapter 10.

Stepping Out of the Casino Mentality

Although they both offer run-of-the-mill poker, the online poker environment is far different from the brick-and-mortar world surroundings. You need to give up what you know and love about

playing in the casino and hunker down by yourself, in the corner, with your computer. Besides your physical surroundings, you experience other differences too . . . like when you want to actually play, you have to first download a poker site's software. Next you have to realize that looking for tells is a bit different, because your opponent may be sitting somewhere across the planet rather than across the table in front of you. And if you're still desiring a bigger challenge, don't worry: You also have to deal with bigger bets online.

Playing poker on the download

To get up and running in the online world, you need a poker *client* (a program that runs on your computer) that you download from the poker Web site of your choice. When you play, your client talks to a poker *server* on your site. The server acts partially as a communication mechanism between you and the other players. When you make any action (call, raise, bet, fold, sit down at the table, and so on), your client passes that information to the server, which relays the action to all your opponents. When your opponents make an action, your site's server relays the information back to you.

We talk about how to pick a quality site in Chapter 2. Downloading software is super easy, and we also cover installation and use in Chapters 2 and 3.

Looking for tells online

The most obvious difference between the physical and the online world is that you don't have another player glaring at you from across the table. The lack of player presence directs your focus to the game, whereas before you may have split your time between looking at your opponent and the cards in play.

But being alone doesn't mean that you play in a world devoid of tells and clues about another player's bluff (or worse, when he tries to sucker you in with a killer hand). It just means that the clues you want to keep track of and watch for are different. We cover the psychological aspect of "reading" online players in more detail in Chapter 6.

Experiencing poker in the pure

Experience shows that, in many ways, Internet poker is a purer form of the game. The decisions you make tend to be more positional than in the brick-and-mortar world. Where you sit in relation

Your pal, the rake

We do know of one way that the online world is identical to brick-and-mortar casinos: the way they make money, namely through the rake. The *rake* is a small percentage of every pot that the poker sites take (usually 5 percent, but sometimes as high as 10 percent). They typically cap the rake at \$3.

The rake is a good moneymaking mechanism for the house, because losers don't care where their money goes, and a winner doesn't mind scooping a \$97 pot rather than one worth \$100. But the erosion is real and unavoidable.

For tournaments, sites charge a registration fee, usually 10 percent of the tourney buy-in, that goes directly to the site. A \$10 single-table tournament costs you \$11 (\$10 plus a \$1 entry fee).

A few sites have a *no-flop, no-drop* policy. If the site's Hold 'Em or Omaha players never see a flop, it doesn't take a rake. Other sites don't rake any pot less than one dollar, which is nice for micro-limit games (for more on micro-limits, see Chapter 8). To find out about a site's rake rules, look at the *help* or *about* section of its Web site.

You don't have a way to reduce the rakes directly, but by taking advantage of sign-up bonuses and "bonus bonuses" (see Chapter 2 for all bonus info), you can certainly help reduce their sting.

Turbo tournaments sometimes cut the registration fee slightly. A \$25 tourney may only have a \$2 fee, rather than \$2.50, and over the long run you can use every penny of your savings. For more on turbo tourneys, see Chapter 7.

to betting around the table and the number of chips you have relative to the other players (especially in tournament play) hold bigger roles.

In the online world, you see bigger betting (pushing all-in in no-limit games for example), largely because you come across more novice players and the stakes can be lower (so players don't have as much to lose). You also see a little less folding (especially in low buy-in, no-limit games) than in the brick-and-mortar world. We delve into these nuances, and more, in Chapter 3.

Gathering the Basics

Before you can play poker on your computer, you need three things: money, the right hardware and software combo, and a hungry poker brain.

Meeting the minimum requirements

If you want to play for money online, you have to have money. For the most part you need electronically-transferable cash (a few sites accept bank checks through the mail — the slowest and clunkiest way to transfer money — but many no longer accept checks directly). Credit cards usually don't work, but debit cards often do, along with electronic checks (*ACH* in bankspeak) and some forms of phone cards. We dedicate Chapter 4 to all money matters.

Sites also have an age restriction. You always have to be at least 18, and some require you to be 21. See the site's rules and regulations for the requirements.

Getting the computer goods

You need three things computer-wise to get going: the proper hardware, a good connection, and a site's poker software.

Hardware

For hardware, you need nothing more than a reliable PC that can run a fairly modern version of Windows (the later the better — nothing earlier than the 1998 version). As tempting as it may sound, you don't want to play on some flake-box machine that, say, automatically shuts off on odd-numbered days or tends to eat a hard drive about once a week.

Unlike when you're playing video games, the speed of your computer, as well as the speed of its connection, doesn't matter. But you do have to worry about the reliability of your connection. Poker isn't a game of millisecond reaction speed. Sites give their players plenty of time to act, so what matters most is that your connection is *reliable*. By reliable, we mean you don't get dropped after you connect to the Internet.



Although a newer version of Windows works best, if you have an old Windows '98 system parked in the garage, you may want to resurrect it for use as a dedicated online poker machine after you catch the online fever. It saves you some familial embarrassment caused by pacing back and forth behind 8-year-old Timmy while you anxiously wait for him to finish his homework on your home's main PC. We're not suggesting you buy a machine *just* to play poker, but if you have an old one lying around, you can put it to good use.

An Internet connection

A dial-up modem that never drops you is much better than a DSL connection that goes belly up every 20 minutes. If you have the luxury of choosing different connection means, pick the one that won't drop you mid-hand. See Chapter 2 for a little more on connection basics and Chapter 5 for information on detecting, and coping with, disconnection.

Poker software

Poker software itself is always free of charge from the site of your choosing. (Don't even *think* about playing a site that tries to charge you just to download its stuff.) Expect downloading to take just a couple minutes if you have a high-speed connection and possibly more than 20 if you have dial-up. We talk more about downloading and the fine art of choosing a good site in Chapter 2.

Bulking up your poker know-how

This book concentrates on the specific nuances of Internet poker. If you're not generally familiar with poker as a game, have never played for hard currency, or don't have a good handle on crazy poker lingo, you need to get a good primer and brush-up. *Poker For Dummies* (Wiley) is an excellent choice (we designed our book to dovetail with that one), as are any number of other poker texts. Chapter 16 gives some good resources you can check out for recommendations on general poker theory, as well as places where you can buy, buy, buy to your little chip-pushing heart's content.

Choosing Your Poker Path

You have many more paths you can take in the online world compared to brick-and-mortar casinos. You can play in tournaments or ring games. You can play fixed-limit or no-limit. You can play Hold 'Em, Omaha, or Stud (and even wild card games). You can play at tables with as many as nine other players or head's up against a sole contender. What separates the Internet world is that you play all these types of games at any time, not just when management gives you the go-ahead in a brick-and-mortar casino.

And you can skip around this book, depending on what you want to do:

- ✔ If you've never played poker before and you want to try it out for free right now, choose a site we list in Chapter 2. Download the software, go to Chapter 3 and figure out the button controls, and then start gambling with play money. All poker sites also have game basics in their help sections — you can definitely learn enough there to play.
- ✔ If you're an experienced hard currency player in the real world, take a quick skim of Chapter 3 to find out about your online controls. Make a hard study of Chapter 2 to choose a great site, and then follow the directions in Chapter 4 to make a financial deposit.
- ✔ If you're already a denizen of the online poker world, but you've just now decided to shift over to play seriously for hard currency, head to Chapter 5. Get our take on the psychology of online poker.