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# Online poker 101: A lesson in losing

**Internet card games are the new campus craze. For some, it's a test to prove their intelligence. But the gambling can spin out of control.**

By Patrick Kerkstra  
Inquirer Staff Writer

Ari Paul's dorm room at the University of Pennsylvania has the trappings of the contemporary collegiate male: acoustic guitar, Hooters calendar, supersize bag of tortilla chips on the floor, and dual flat-screen computer monitors at which he's playing three simultaneous hands of online poker.

The game is Omaha high, close to Texas hold 'em. Cards flick across the screens at a speed no casino dealer could match.

The stakes are low by Paul's old standards, a total buy-in of just \$500 at the three virtual tables. A political science major in a grueling senior year, he has reined in his game since last summer, when he routinely logged into online poker "rooms" with \$3,000 and stayed 12 hours. His win rate (he calls it "expected value") has tumbled from \$150 an hour to \$30.

Still, he claims to be up about \$30,000 over two years.

If his accounting is accurate, Paul is far more skilled and certainly luckier than most of the estimated 1.6 million, overwhelmingly male college students nationwide who in the last few years have become regular - some admit addicted - players of Internet poker.

Twenty-six percent of college men gamble in online card games at least once a month and 4 percent once a week or more, up from 1 percent a year earlier, according to a 2005 survey by Penn's Annenberg Public Policy Center. The vast majority are betting on poker.

"We keep waiting for it to peak," said Dan Romer, director of the Risk Survey of Youth. "So far it hasn't "

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<b>Reader reviews</b>	For generations of college students killing time, penny ante was a staple of dorm life. Then along came television's million-dollar prime-time tourneys about five years ago to gild poker in trendiness.
<b>SITE SERVICES</b>	
<b>Help/Contact us</b>	By 2003, the fever was sweeping the Internet.
<b>Advertise</b>	The Justice Department considers Internet gambling illegal at any age. So the online poker rooms - at least 300 of them - are based outside the United States, with many in Canada but the largest in Gibraltar. Their profits come from raking in a very fat pot: \$60 billion bet worldwide last year, according to London analysts who research the online poker industry for investors.
<b>Buy photos</b>	At any given moment, the rooms are filled with thousands of players seated up to 10 per table and known to one another only by handles such as EIDonkerino and Chiptaker32.
<b>Online store</b>	All it takes to get in the game is a computer and a credit card. And what college student doesn't have those?
<b>RSS</b>	Greg Hogan did.
<b>Partners</b>	The 19-year-old son of a Baptist minister from Ohio, he was president of his sophomore Class of 2008 at Lehigh University. He also was an avid online poker player, although not quite as good at it as Ari Paul.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <a href="#">Tribe.net</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">PHILLYfunguide.com</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">NBC10.com</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Bucks Midweek</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Montco Midweek</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Northeast Times</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Taste of Phila.</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">DeMarco's Italian Specialties</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">PhillyNeighborhoods.org</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Homes and Living</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Beach and Bay Homes</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">Active Adult Housing</a></li> <li>● <a href="#">My Wedding</a></li> </ul>	<p>On Dec. 9, he walked into an Allentown bank, handed a teller a note claiming he had a gun, and left with \$2,871. The young man's motivation, his attorney said, was \$5,000 in poker debts.</p> <p>Now in a gambling addiction program in Louisiana, Hogan faces a preliminary hearing early next month. A guilty plea or a conviction could land him in prison for up to 20 years.</p> <p>Romer, of the Annenberg Center, said he hoped the bizarre heist would make colleges and parents take notice of what's going on behind closed dorm doors.</p> <p>"The awareness is just not there yet that some kids who are exposed to this are going to get hooked," he said. "These kids are pretty smart, and they think poker is a skill-based form of gambling that they can control. But a lot of them can't."</p> <p>Jeff Simon, 18, is one of them.</p> <p>He followed a typical path into Internet poker rooms, beginning in 10th grade when he and his father watched regular pro tournaments on TV. As a junior, he cut his teeth on low-stakes games against his buddies in one of their basements, and usually won.</p> <p>That year, he started playing online, where the action was exponentially faster and the opponents more cunning and experienced. He bet money he made at a host of part-time jobs.</p> <p>"I'd always deposit \$50 or \$100 at a time. It didn't seem too serious. But I would do it over and over and over again," said Simon, now a freshman at a university in the Pennsylvania suburbs. Although he allowed his real name to be used, he asked that his school not be identified so he wouldn't be so easily singled out on campus.</p> <p>Simon told his parents of his addiction before starting college and asked them to hold his</p>

earnings from his summer jobs.

They returned the money shortly before he moved into his dorm. Instantly, he was playing full tilt and emptying his bank account. He placed his losses as high as \$8,500.

Less than two months ago, Simon folded. He spoke to a psychologist and went to Gamblers Anonymous meetings. He resisted filling out tantalizing credit-card applications that would have allowed him to keep wagering. And he revisited dozens of his old online poker haunts - to fill out forms instructing them to bar him from ever playing there again.

"There was nothing to stop me," he said, "but myself."

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Colleges have done little to break up the game.

"I'm sure students are playing it," said Penn spokeswoman Phyllis Holtzman, "but it's not on anyone's radar screen administratively."

Some schools are even playing along.

At Lehigh University - the ill-starred Greg Hogan's almost-alma mater - students in one computer science course are instructed to create a "bot" that simulates a human poker player. The class features \$13,000 worth of software donated by a firm called Poker Academy.

Other Philadelphia area universities, including Temple, Drexel, Rowan and St. Joseph's, routinely give the official nod to charity hold 'em tournaments and poker nights on campus.

Federal prosecutors and state attorneys general, among them New York's Eliot Spitzer, have made sporadic attempts to curb online gambling, principally by pressuring banks to decline credit-card charges made at poker sites. Many banks went along, but it didn't matter much: Middlemen sprang up to take charges and transfer the funds to online rooms.

Meanwhile, the poker sites market themselves relentlessly to the college demographic, hiring "student representatives" to promote the game and sponsoring "Win Your Tuition" tournaments. One site, AbsolutePoker.com, recently boasted in a news release that the winners of its last two tuition competitions weren't "lazy, beer-swilling, up-all-night bums," but "4.0 students and model citizens."

"We believe that this program is one of the best ways to create real added value for college students," Michael Edwards, AbsolutePoker's business manager, said in the release.

A hard sell isn't necessary.

So many accomplished students are seduced by online poker because "it's a test of will, a test of intelligence," said Paul, the Penn senior. "It's psychological warfare" - a battle they're confident of winning because they believe they're smarter than their opponents.

The most obsessed often come to describe their play as a "job" requiring constant, and sometimes tedious, discipline.

"You learn your odds, all of the math behind it, the correct strategies," said Jason Leinbach,

a third-year Drexel student who keeps a blog of his poker exploits.

To gain an edge at a table where opponents' facial tics, nervous smiles and other "tells" cannot be seen, players can use sophisticated software to track their own play and analyze the tendencies of other gamblers.

According to his software, Kent, also a third-year Drexel student, has played 17,190 hands of online poker in the last three months. The count would have been higher a year ago, he said, but his GPA was taking a battering from the 13- to 15-hour daily sessions.

"I didn't go to any classes," he said.

After a tete-a-tete with his father, Kent cut back and his grades improved. But he still plays plenty and claims to win about \$100 a night.

Last week, with the remains of a KFC dinner beside him, he made \$112 in under 40 minutes. His careful records show that twice since November he has won more than \$1,500 a night, and lost nearly \$3,000 in an unlucky stretch in December.

In the last two years, he said, his winnings have totaled \$60,000, which is why he did not want his full name used.

"I don't need an audit," Kent said.

He does need a new roommate. His old one, Kent said, let an online gambling addiction spin out of control. He lost his Drexel scholarship, dropped out, and moved out.

Let that be a warning, said poker pro Ashok Surapaneni.

"In a casino or a game with friends, you know where you stand. You have cash or chips on the table. There's a sobering effect when you lose. Online, it's just numbers on a screen."

That might ring a little hollow coming from Surapaneni, 23, revered by many as "the godfather of Penn poker."

Two years ago, he was a Wharton School sophomore with near-perfect grades. But academia was "limiting my earning potential," he said. And so he moved to Las Vegas to play poker full time, largely online.

He declined to divulge his earnings, but they are reputed to exceed a half-million dollars.

"This is the new stock trading," Surapaneni said, "the new tech start-up."

Perhaps, but just for a few. Even players as intense as Drexel's Leinbach can't deny that.

"I don't want to count on cards for rent," he said. "I've figured out you're not always going to win."

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