

mbbling

Don't try to beat the odds until you know exactly how the Web brings the excitement—and risks—of casinos to your desktop

BY PERRY GLASSER

Dice

Sin. It's the killer app. That's no secret. The same miracle of interactivity that brings online shopping and instant stock quotes to our desktops can also enable us to enjoy secret pleasures in the privacy of our own homes. No question about it; the second favorite online vice is gambling.

We are not going to call it gaming because gambling is gambling. Even if you're just engaged in a friendly game of poker with the guys, try not paying a gambling debt to find out if anyone thinks it is just a game. There is no such thing as unserious gambling. Sure, it can be a recreation, but not all recreations are meant to be relaxing, and the point of gambling has never been relaxation. Besides, we wouldn't want to use the word "gaming" for fear you might confuse roulette with anything Lara Croft does. Granted, the nimble Lara Croft would look swell in an elegant black strapless velvet dress and an understated diamond choker at her throat as she leans across

a baccarat table, but the risks she takes are nothing compared to your pulse rate when you hit 16 and the dealer shows a King.

Ms. Croft and her consort, Bond—James Bond—are likely to be found in the more sedate gambling rooms of the French Riviera, perhaps in Monaco itself, or in the casinos of some of the islands in the Caribbean. But casinos come in more than one flavor. Rest assured that if your gambling style is closer to that of riverboat gambling or cowboy saloons, the Web has rootin'-tootin' sites for you, too. Try not to kick over the cyber-spittoon, pardner, as you mosey through those swinging doors. The fact is, that if you are ready to put your marker on the craps table, have the nerve to wager up to \$200 on the turn of the next card, want to back your educated sports opinion with a small wager or feel compelled to contribute to improving the breed by putting a double sawbuck on the nose of a Kentucky Derby hopeful, the Web can accommodate you.

Legalities

Can this be legal? The answer is "sort of." The movement to ban all Internet gambling is led by Senator John Kyl (R-Ariz.). Kyl's crusade is a moral campaign against a fire-breathing dragon that regurgitates money, so if history is any guide, in this case the dragon is liable to incinerate the crusaders. For one thing, most Internet gambling operations are located offshore in places to which the long arm of U.S. law simply does not extend. Furthermore, those tiny sovereign nations in the Caribbean and Latin America that house the gambling site servers are enjoying the cascade of money coming toward them from the States, and so, international politics being what it is, the U.S. is not likely to alienate the people of Curacao and Antigua any time soon. Rattling his political sword as the champion of Truth and Righteousness, Senator Kyl must have overlooked the Native American tribes in his home state running casinos on the reservation, and we won't mention the heritage of poker in Tombstone, the town too tough to die. What, we wonder, would Doc Holliday and Wyatt Earp have to say to their Senator? Finally, the Web's nature makes it nearly impossible to choke off gambling at the delivery end. With 6,000 Internet service providers in the U.S., it's just not doable, and the really big ISPs, such as AOL, are reluctant to voluntarily exclude their members from any online service; doing so only gives their competitors an advantage. Besides, as we all know, should the forces of moral righteousness get their way and leave us with only Bingo at church, any clever hacker can simulate an Internet hookup that makes the user seem to be somewhere else. As long as there are enough of us who want to blow on some cyberdice, bet that someone is ready, willing and able to make it possible.

But the pile of chips on the table is awfully high, so the smart money is wagering that U.S. authorities will try to regulate, rather than ban, online gambling. Politicians have an affinity for cold cash; they find it difficult to leave the stuff unhindered and undivided. Seventy years after the mobster Meyer Lansky invented the numbers racket, most of the states in the Union are running lotteries that include Pick 3 or 4 options (with payoff odds so low Lansky would blush). Right now, no one knows for sure how much money is being gambled on the Net. Estimates are far ranging, with a low guess of \$1.2 billion this year that could grow to \$2.1 billion in 2001 at as many as 400 gambling sites. There seems to be no limit to the potential growth. Remember, the high-stakes craps player in *Guys and Dolls* wasn't named "Sky" Masterson because he was timid.

Buy-In

Whether you want to bet sports or play traditional casino games, with minor wrinkles and variations, all gambling sites work the same way. You



Ten Places to Place Your Bets

You may need proprietary software that enables play, so shop around for an interface you like before you commit to one site or another. Of course, you can always download all of 'em!

Sportbet.com
www.sportbet.com

Casino On Net
www.entercasino.com

English Harbour Online Casino
www.englishharbour.com

Betmaker.com
www.betmaker.com

Australian Casino
www.australiancasino.com

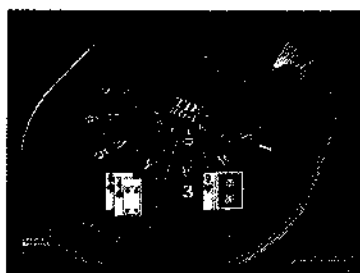
Cowboy Casino
www.cowboycasino.com

Pharaoh's Casino
www.pharaohscasino.com

enterbet.com
www.enterbet.com

i-sportsbook
www.i-sportsbook.com

Sharky's Casino
www.sharkys.co.cr/home1.htm



hope to die that the odds their online players confront are no different—or are perhaps better—than the odds players face in brick-and-mortar parlors. Video poker is a computer game no matter where it is played, and slot machines with mechanical gears and spinning rollers are dinosaurs. In fact, the only reason one-armed bandits have a lever at all is to give traditionalist players something to do. The machines can be made to operate at the drop of a coin. And just as is true online, payout rates on slot machines are set by the house; not so high as to frustrate players, but high enough that the casino makes some profit.

log on, you download the free proprietary software that usually requires a plug-in or two and you open an account. Some sites will accept standard credit cards; others will also accept Western Union wired cash. The point is that no online gambling concern will mail you a direct check with your winnings because to do so would violate the postal laws, nor will any online gambling concern take your action until it has some guarantee that it can collect your losses. Your credit card, on the other hand, can receive a credit or debit at any time. There are a few sites that will accept your personal check, but if you are hot to play that procedure is going to delay you a few weeks as the casino waits for your check to clear and your account to have some real cash in it.

All the sites offer pretty much the same games: craps, blackjack, video poker, slot machines and roulette, as well as a sports book. Two hundred dollars seems to be the standard online betting limit. **Golden Palace Online Casino** (www.goldenpalace.com), for example, offers the novice many learning opportunities. From the site's home page you can click to samples of the 28 games at the site, including the most popular casino games. To play any of the games for real money, you'll need their downloadable software, and thank goodness, because when we sampled Blackjack, the Shockwave plug-in froze when we went down for double with an 11 against a King showing for the dealer. Golden Palace Online Casino's software is more reliable than that.

One important difference among the sites is the look and feel of the action. The software is designed to work on low-end computers, but if 3-D effects and sound are important to you, best to sample the software before you financially commit to playing. It's one experience to see the dice roll out across a plush green felt; it's another thing to read, "the dice say 7." For best play, you'll need at least 20MB of space, a Direct X plug-in, a 200MHz processor and a monitor capable of 800x600 resolution supporting 256 colors.

We share your skepticism about computers randomizing how the ball falls on a cyber-roulette wheel, but all the casinos cross their hearts and

Feel Out the Room

Maybe the best strategy before your trembling mouse clicks you into your first cyber betting hall is not to enter one at all. Instead, visit **Online Gambling Magazine** (www.gamblingmagazine.com). This site gives lots of good, sane advice about how to make your gambling dollar last longer. Systems that promise ways to beat the house just ignore the mathematics of chance. Casinos don't get rich by being luckier than you are; they just outlast the players. If a payout rate is 98 percent, the house is keeping 2c on every dollar wagered, and the games are designed to give the house just a small edge. For example, a single number bet at roulette pays 35:1, and that may seem reasonable when you count only 36 numbers on the felt, but look again: In the U.S. most roulette wheels also have a 0 and 00 slot, both neither red nor black, but colored green. So the true odds on hitting a single number is 38:1, and Red and Black may pay at even money, but both come in slightly less than half the time. (European wheels give the players a better break—only one 0 slot.) If enough players play for a long time, the house will eventually take all the money in the house—two pennies at a time. Honest casinos live on volume, not luck. Good gambling means lasting longer, that's all.

Which is why we suggest you read *Online Gambling Magazine's* Black List, a simple alphabetical roster of online gambling operations that have either vanished or are not recommended. That list is intimidating—it contains well over 200 names. Read Not Recommended to learn what the specific problem at a specific site is. Complaints by players are recorded there for anyone to read—the most frequent gripe being about the difficulty of recovering a player's money.

Common sense tips will also keep you out of the fly-by-night, quick-score online operations that will take your hard-earned dough on Monday and leave no forwarding address on Tuesday. Beware of any online gambling site that uses an anonymous, freebie e-mail address—such as those supplied by Hotmail or Yahoo! This caution isn't a comment on those

services, mind you, but the wise gambling consumer will want to ask just why a business that expects to be more than temporary wants an untraceable e-mail.

Online Gambling Magazine spotlights a Casino of the Day and the Month, offers Consumer Advice and delivers Corporate

Profiles so a player can have a sense of the business that's streaming Keno numbers to the desktop. Another help can be found at the **Interactive Gaming Council** (www.igcouncil.org), a voluntary industry regulatory board. Members who adhere to the Council's principles are willing to give a sucker an almost-even break, but since not all members display the council's emblem, you can check the organization's membership rolls at the IGC Membership page.

Sports Betting

If you are of the persuasion that games of chance are for suckers but that betting on a sports event is a cool calculation that can lead to profit, we are not going to explain to you just why professional gamblers pay off supposedly even-money matches such as boxing at 4:5. However, as a spectator, some of us find our interest heightened if we have a wager on an event's outcome.

Most casinos have a dedicated sports book, but a few Web sites specialize in taking action exclusively on sports. **The Royal Bet Sports Book**

When It's Not All Fun and Games

If gambling becomes an addiction, seek help

You or someone you know may need help with a gambling addiction. If so, turn your browser to the home page of **Gamblers' Anonymous** (www.gamblersanonymous.org). Their mission is plain. "Gamblers' Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from a gambling problem."

GA offers what is now a classic 12-step program, modeled after Alcoholics Anonymous, a program of spiritual and peer support whose only justification is that it works. At the Web site, you may want first to go to the FAQs page, clearly designed and written for the gambler worried about his habits but not yet committed to seeking help by taking that all-important first step of acknowledging that one is ill. To the question "Isn't compulsive gambling basically a financial problem?" the site offers the answer:

"No, compulsive gambling is an emotional problem. A person in the grip of this illness creates mountains of apparently insolvable problems. Of course, financial problems are created, but they also find themselves facing marital, employment or legal problems. Compulsive gamblers find friends have been lost and relatives have rejected them. Of the many serious difficulties created, the financial problems seem the easiest to solve." These are sobering words to those who imagine that after the next big score they will be buying their families a better house, a yacht and peace.

The only requirement for membership is "a desire to stop gambling." Contact GA at isomain@gamblersanonymous.org or write to:

Gamblers Anonymous
International Service Office, P.O. Box 17173
Los Angeles, CA 90017
Phone (213) 386-8789 - Fax (213) 386-0030

—P. Glasser

(www.royalbet.com) takes a deposit for members or accepts major credit cards as well as Western Union wired cash to open an account. The site provides access to real-time betting lines from Las Vegas and takes action on football, soccer, basketball, baseball, hockey, tennis, auto racing, golf, rugby, cricket and boxing. Don't be thrown off by cricket. Sports betting has long been legal in the United Kingdom, where every June thousands of Brits place a few quid on their favorites at the Wimbledon Tennis Tournament. Royal will also take early action on American baseball pennant races as well as early action on horse racing. When we visited in February, months before the Run for the Roses, Royal was quoting odds on horses eligible for the Kentucky Derby.

Of course, if you prefer the smoke, noise and ambience of a casino, online betting seems a cold-hearted activity. There are trade-offs for at-home convenience. Perhaps you can persuade your spouse to wear fishnet stockings, supply you with drinks and wear four-inch heels, but he might, after all, feel silly in that get-up and will likely trip over his own feet. The one sure thing to bet on is to never forget to wager with your head. **WIG**

Editor Perry Glasser likes long-shots so much that he yells, "Edge!" for coin flips.

