

Wednesday, January 30, 2008

Tiscali admits block on online poker

In a call to Tiscali Broadband technical support today I was told, in pigeon English of course: "At peak times, between 5pm and 11pm, we block gambling sites". In fact it's only Playtech sites I've been having trouble with. That's the iPoker network (home to major European operators like Blue Square, Bet365 and Paddy Power) and also their casino product that's off limits. Others seem to be working OK. There have been no such issues with my cable internet, so I could confidently deflect their arguments that it must be either me or the site I'm trying to connect to that had the problem. I'm quite fortunate to only use Tiscali as a backup internet provider (relying on the net to work from home this seemed like a good idea after too many daytime cable blackouts last year, so I picked the cheapest ADSL option). However, the revelation that an ISP that I pay to - gosh - provide internet service only gives me access to certain parts of the net at their discretion came just a few minutes after the same person had told me emphatically, "no sir we do not block anything". "You block BitTorrent though, don't you", I enquired, knowing this to be the case. "No. We. Do. Not. Block. Anything". She spoke to me in the same patronisingly slow way that I'd been reduced to using myself in order to be understood. We'd already been through the rigmarole of trying to unearth my connection problem, despite me not actually having one. Is the router switched on? Is my PC switched on? Answer yes to both of these and they take their first stab at telling you it must all be your fault. No - I said I'm connected! How many lights are on the router? Well, not only do you not know what router I have, the number of lights will depend on how many network cables are plugged into it, so how the hell does that tell you anything? Apparently, if a light is flashing it means you don't have a reliable connection (which is your fault, obviously) and not that data is being sent over the corresponding port, as I'd mistakenly believed for years. Can I replace my microfilters in case they're broken? Oh yes, sure. That question a master stroke in call avoidance, encouraging anyone who called from a landline to hang up by making them unplug their phone! Assuming, of course, that they actually have a spare microfilter - I can't imagine many would. "It's not the router. It's not the microfilter. Because! I'm! Already! Connected!" I was only putting myself through all this because I just wasn't sure if it was a blanket ban, a side-effect of their recent cock up that blocked iTunes, or because I'd actually made their shitlist that I was denied access to some online gambling via Tiscali. I'm aware of their fair usage policy, under which the very highest bandwidth consumers are throttled during peak hours. Peak hours, here, are defined as 6pm to 11pm. Not 5pm to 11pm like they said on the phone. Certainly not 4pm to midnight, which is when I'm actually blocked from gambling with this ISP. I really wouldn't be surprised if I have been flagged as an unfair user. After all, I do download a fair few TV shows onto a PC in the living room (and I use Tiscali for this so it doesn't slow down my connection for work). It's only the same shows you'd actually get on TV, except this way I can often get them a little earlier - and in high definition. Although I have a Virgin Media V+ box with high-def output, the sum total of their HD content is one channel (BBC HD), which is only on for about 4 hours a day anyway. I'd already noticed that it's virtually impossible to use BitTorrent in the evening, but this really doesn't matter much to me. I will just stick in whatever shows I want to download and let it do its stuff whenever. Usually everything is there the next day. Under the fair usage policy, you get three strikes before you're out. (1) Please reduce your usage. (2) Pretty please, with a cherry on top, reduce your usage. (3) Fuck you, now try surfing at teatime you little piece of shit. I've never had a single warning. But now we know it's a blanket ban. Online gambling, apparently, uses more of the network than other services and other customers could be affected by my degenerate activities. "Suppose there's a file that another customer really wants to download, it could be really important to them and they can't do it", was the brilliant example. It must not be that important to me, however, if I'm playing online poker for real money and I'm disconnected mid-hand (clearly, this would never happen during working hours though...) or I've already bought into a tournament for this evening and then can't log in to take my seat. In fact it's been an online casino that actually mattered to me this week. I have a £300 signup bonus that needs £8000 cycling through it on blackjack within 2 weeks or I'll forfeit it. Expected value: £250. It'll be a struggle if I can't ever play before midnight. After 35 minutes on the phone, I asked to speak to a supervisor, was put on hold, turned on speakerphone and got on with something else while I naively waited for somebody that doesn't actually exist to pick up the call. Fortunately I used saynoto0870.com to find a geographic number so it was included in my mobile phone minutes, because this is when I eventually gave up waiting:

Posted by luckydonut in Online Poker at 17:22

Thursday, January 24, 2008

Chip and a chair

Here's something I've never actually seen in an online tournament before - a player who was left with exactly one chip after losing an early all-in confrontation. This is extremely rare, and with blinds starting at 20/40, it will almost never happen on the first level. So if you want to try this at home and go for the most heroic chip-and-a-chair comeback to win ever, here's how to get started: Get into a three-way all-in situation on the very first hand. Make sure there's enough dead money that the pot won't divide evenly by 3, and make sure you are out of position so you receive the extra chip. Pushing from the small blind and forcing the big blind out will do; that 40 chip big blind splits nicely into 14/13/13. In this case, everyone held a J on a 9TQK board. Never mind that it's not the nuts, you can't wait around that, just get all your chips in if the opportunity presents itself. Now that you have exactly one more chip than another player, you just need to get it all-in against him and lose. Make sure nobody else that covers you is in the pot too, otherwise you'll either bust out or finish with two chips instead of one. Good luck!

Posted by luckydonut in Online Poker at 13:08

Saturday, January 19, 2008

Yeah rat fans!

The first batch of Vegas mailers of the year arrived today. I don't think there's anything that would have been influenced by our play at Christmas yet, but still a few decent offers. It's already enough to not have to pay for five of the nine nights on our trip in March! T-64, by the way. I got a two night free stay at Terrible's which includes \$50 of slot play just for showing up - pretty good. I've heard that Terrible's have downgraded the 9/6 jacks-or-better video poker machines that were a positive expectation game when combined with food comps and gas card promotions. If this is true then we'll probably just take their hospitality and money and not worry too much if they kick me off the mailing list for not giving them any action. Claire got two separate room offers from Four Queens. One is specifically for Superbowl weekend and even though we can't use I'm quite excited that any casino would consider us valuable enough for a free room on one of the busiest weekends of the year! Of course, they're not allowed to mention the NFL's championship game by name, it's simply an invitation to "the most spectacular game of the year". We can actually use the other offer on our next trip. To very tenuously commemorate the Chinese New Year, we can take 3 nights free any time in February or March and add additional nights at a bargain rate if we can't get enough freebies anywhere else. Not only that, but as it's the Year of the Rat, there's another very special players club offer that's going to be very hard to resist. Earn 777 slot points (\$6216 coin in) and get a free "collectable jeweled rat". I do hope it's in addition to the \$19 cashback those points will earn, not instead, but however it works I'm sure curiosity will get the better of me on this one. Who wouldn't want a lucky rat? And with jewels too!

Posted by luckydonut in Las Vegas at 23:31

Friday, January 18, 2008

Dublin down

I am delighted to report that my first trip to Dublin - which of course involved a little poker - was an astounding success. I'm about even. I played at Cool Hand Luke's, which is in the process of being converted to Gutshot's Dublin venue. The basement is already decked out with orange and black G-swirls, and has a fine internet cafe and deli open until 4am. The casino and card room upstairs, however, are quite different - and different to anywhere I've ever played before. It's a very homely place, in fact it all just feels like a big house, like you're playing in someone's living room. Very laid back, very friendly and very loose poker. It's just a shame I couldn't find a hand to take advantage! I went deep in the EUR 20 rebuy tournament, making the final table and just missing the money by 5 places. This is an even more impressive achievement if I reveal that a massive six players started the game, although numbers had swollen to 18 at one point. This hand presented an interesting ruling: at 25/50 and on my big blind (the cheek of it all) the player to my left raised to 150, his neighbour re-popped it to 500 and the next player moved all in for 1350. A surprise fold next, followed by another re-push for about 2000. The next player to act realised he had only been dealt one card and asked the dealer what happens now. The floor came over and explained that there's no way it's a do-over with all that action and he mucked his card without even looking at it. Back to the original raiser who obviously didn't like his spot and called a different supervisor over for another ruling on the same thing. Just in case, I suppose. Of course, he said the same thing - the action all stands. "But you can play with one card if you want", he added. Would he want to, facing three raises? I'm actually not sure. It's feasible if he had a good card like a jack or queen. However it was too late and Original Raiser realised that he could negate his positional disadvantage by getting all the chips in pre-flop and called, and four hands got flipped over for a marathon. One of them actually had pocket kings, the rest all ace-rag and the worst one - A4, but it was sooted - spiked two fours to take it down. After my elimination, the only game running was Omaha. Short handed too - just five others when I joined the game - and as I've never played Omaha live before, this was going to be interesting. I bought in for the minimum, sat tight, waited for the nuts and then showed it down for a 3-way chop. Fantastic. We all had the straight on the turn, but I was the only one with a flush redraw - does that qualify as a bad beat story in Omaha? An American exchange student turned up wanting to play Hold'em and so the players agreed to change our game to round-of-each so he could join in. The action was fast and furious in both games and I was glad I'd only bought in for EUR 50. I'm actually a little more fond of the Euro now I've heard the Irish call it a "quid". Take it a step further, call it a "pound" and tweak the exchange rate a little and I'm all for it. After one player called off EUR 230 on the river with a set vs the nut straight in Omaha, he created an awesome tilt pot in Hold'em a few hands later. Betting and raising in the dark for most of the hand against a player who flopped two pair with king-ten in the small blind, he was finally forced to look at his cards after being check-raised on the turn. The board showed KT3A and, somehow the blind raiser had been sitting on ace-king all along for a EUR 800 pot after all the money made it to the middle. It lasted about three rounds before we were back to just Omaha. The token American had busted and went home, although he did last long enough to try to explain how the presidential elections work. He must have made a good job of it too, as I actually feel like I have a clue now. In the last hand of Hold'em I folded 35o face-up to a button raise on my big blind (realising I'd hardly played a thing and wanting to show why) only to be advised "that's not a bad hand in a two-handed pot". I'm not convinced - there's only two hands it dominates, and one of them is The Powerhouse - but unfortunately it was too late to adjust my style anyway. I carried on leaking at Omaha until my host for the trip (apparently I was there for work) joined the game, at which point I suddenly doubled up through him and then stacked him! The most impressively bit was when my pair of kings and two spanners got there on the river on a QQ7AK board. Hey, don't blame me, I never pretended to know anything about this game!

Posted by luckydonut in My Results at 23:40

Tuesday, January 15, 2008

Do women get the best casino offers?

Finally my online status for Harrah's Total Rewards is showing up as Diamond. I had a slight suspicion that the nice lady at the Rio hadn't actually upgraded me properly, but that she'd simply reprinted my details on a nice shiny diamond card to shut me up. Seems like that was actually the case. I had to talk to someone at the Rio as I had the wrong kind of ID in Laughlin. A UK driving license was good enough to get a brand new card printed when we arrived, but suddenly no longer good enough to have anyone at Total Rewards want to speak to me after I'd finished cycling thirty grand through one of their machines. I'm only a little cynical, because to their credit it only took one email to get everything put right. I'd waited two weeks, checking the web site daily for the colour of the little card icon next to my name to change from gold to diamond. Eventually I wrote to ask when they would start to make with the free stuff. Hello Mr. Newman, it appears that you earned that tier score out our Laughlin property. I've contacted their personnel to upgrade your tier status. Thank you! Imperial Palace Total Rewards Central is Imperial Palace? A few months ago it wasn't even worthy of being part of the Total Rewards program! More likely their web site remembered the last casino I'd been looking at for room offers, and I had been rummaging around, desperately trying to find something - anything - for free. I'd heard Tim and Michele on Five Hundy By Midnight saying they could usually get a Luv Tub room or even a Suite at Imperial Palace comped on any weeknight with their Diamond offers. I got excited. My best deal though was (and still is, even now with my shiny new status gleaming in the corner) a basic room for \$62 per night. It's really not hard to get a better rate than that from almost anywhere else, so maybe I should give it a bit longer for the offers to come through... While logged in tonight I took the opportunity to update my mailing address. They had it ever so slightly wrong, and I didn't want anything to come between me and my junk mail. I also wondered if I might be able to update my name. It really doesn't bother me that the only people who call me by my full name besides my parents are slot club staff, who generally copy everything verbatim from my ID without asking. But Christopher is sometimes a bit long for the slot card display, and I really don't like being called Christophe by a machine that was programmed by someone who decided nobody would ever have a first name longer than ten letters. No, it's not possible to change your name but, should the need ever arise, changing your gender is really easy. Just two clicks and I could be a woman. Now, some thought must have gone into this. It's an updateable part of the profile with it's own submit button, but your name and date of birth are read only. The only thing you can change is your gender! Why might I want to update my date of birth? Perhaps because Americans write dates in a funny order and it's usually a lottery over whether they put me down for May 3rd or March 5th. The only way I could tell if they got it right here is by checking to see which of the sets of numbers you would pick from to change it only goes up to 12. Your name never changes though, right? Well, maybe just once when you get married... but, that happens so rarely in Vegas that I guess it's hardly worth considering and Vegas weddings don't count anyway. So, do women get the best casino offers? There's one way to find out...

Posted by luckydonut in Las Vegas at 23:39

Friday, January 11. 2008

Which way is the buffet?

The Palazzo may not have managed to open on time, but Station Casinos made sure that this place did. Affectionally dubbed "Trailer Station", the smallest gambling joint in Las Vegas opened Tuesday and lasted just eight hours before being closed again - with no plans for a spectacular implosion. That's just long enough to make sure that the former site of the Castaways casino retains its gaming licence. Looks cosy, doesn't it? The Review Journal has the full story.

Posted by luckydonut in Las Vegas at 01:41

Wednesday, January 9, 2008

Poker Nostalgia

For their 25th anniversary, Poker Player Newspaper has made available copies of some of their very first issues from 1982. It's a fascinating read. Back then, the Stardust was in its prime..... the Golden Nugget was spreading \$1/\$2 Pineapple on a regular basis and David Sklansky had great hair. In issue 1, Mike Caro wrote his first "Today's word" column, which is still going strong today and he only looks slightly different. There's a feature on computerised poker tables, where players see their cards on a screen but still bet on the felt. Not quite as sophisticated as the PokerPro tables that can be used to create a fully automated cardroom, but it's interesting to see that what's being touted as the latest advancements in poker technology is not quite as innovative as many may think. This was my favourite story though. A young whippersnapper named Stu Ungar caused some fuss among the old-timers at the tables by wearing - god forbid - headphones while playing poker. It's not like he started a trend or anything...

Posted by luckydonut in Poker at 18:53

Sunday, January 6, 2008

Reflections on Las Vegas

Carefully constructed compositions using all available light sources, or photos spoiled by taking them through perspex? Art or bollocks? You decide...

Posted by luckydonut in Las Vegas December 07, Photos at 10:47

Thursday, January 3, 2008

Who hell they?

Forget the Bellagio Gallery of Fine Art, check out this beauty from inside the McDonalds between Harrah's and Casino Royale. I mostly get this.Â Gladys KnightÂ (left), Celine Dion (centre) and Wayne NewtonÂ (right) - none of them have shows in town anymore, but that's OK.Â I understand why they would be chosen to be immortalised in a burger joint on the Strip. But who is that staring over Celine's shoulder?Â I just can't figure it out.Â Oh but there's more... It's an amazing picture, but who the hell are they all?

Posted by luckydonut in Las Vegas December 07 at 09:25

Wednesday, January 2, 2008

Diamond geezer

Isn't this pretty? Say hello to my Diamond Total Rewards card! It's not the very top tier of the Harrah's players club, but it should still be enough to fool them into treating me like a high roller! This card acts as a priority pass to just about everything. Staying at the hotel? No need to wait in line to check in. Don't want to wait for a buffet, or for the casino cashier, or for the players club? Even for a damn taxi. Just flash the plastic and step right past the plebs to the front of the line. Valet parking full? No sir, not if you're Diamond. There's also the Diamond Lounges - one in every property - where you can go and chill out with free food and a bar. If you're worthy. Then there's the wealth of offers that I should now start to get by mail. Room discounts (possibly even free stays), free show tickets (two every month guaranteed) and even cheques for real money just to get me back into the casino. Best of all, because I earned this status on January 1st, it's valid right through until March of 2009. Although the card pictured says 03/08, apparently they don't have the new batch yet and they'll be sent out in the mail in February. So what does this little life upgrade cost? Much less than you would expect if you do it right. To earn Diamond status you usually have to earn 10,000 reward credits in a year, but if you clock up 3,000 in a day and ask nicely, you'll get upgraded instantly if it's your first time. To earn a reward credit you have to feed in and spin through \$5 on a slot machine, or \$10 on video poker. Clearly, doing it in a day is much better than gambling \$50k or \$100k over the course of a year, but pumping fifteen grand through a slot machine in one sitting wasn't an attractive proposition. But with the horrible paytables at the Harrah's casinos in Las Vegas, neither was \$30k on video poker. So we drove to Harrah's Laughlin, where there's several 99.5% payback video poker games, including a 50-line multi-play effort. 50 lines x 5 coins per hand x 5c per coin is \$12.50 per spin, but because you're drawing each hand fifty times you always get at least some money back - in theory it's a low-variance way to churn through the play requirement quickly. With two of us playing on the same account, we got there in about four hours. This really is one of the most peculiar advantage plays I've tried. I never thought it would be possible to get good value out of Harrah's, but so far the signs are very good. With a 0.5% house edge (compared to about 3% at best in Vegas) the theoretical cost of fifteen months of VIP treatment is \$150. The 3,000 base reward credits I earned and (I don't know why but I'm not complaining!) a further 9,000 bonus credits awarded on top of that are worth in total \$120 back in comp for starters. Just one room offer, cashback cheque or pair of free show tickets will push this into a money making play! Heck, I'd pay \$30 just for hassle-free parking at Caesars for a year... In fact I ran below expectation (just two royal flushes between us in 120,000 hands - I'm owed again!) and it cost me about \$600, so I might need to see Jubilee! twice or three times to get full value. Things would have been sweeter with even just one \$200 royal when we drew 50 times at the TJKK of diamonds:

Posted by luckydonut in Las Vegas December 07 at 19:14

Tuesday, January 1, 2008

No smoke without fireworks

Thanks very much indeed to Channel 13 News who reassured me that the roof of the Gold Coast car park would actually be a great place to watch the Strip fireworks. They got it wrong. I already knew that the view of most of the landmark hotels from there is obstructed by either the Rio or some construction project, but there is a great view of Luxor and Mandalay Bay. The TV report I saw went something along the lines of: "I'm here at Mandalay Bay with lots of drunk people. Hey look, here's a middle-aged couple who scored tickets to get into the Foundation Room tonight, they dance like your dad, how cool is that?" - "Yeah! Happy new year! Woo! Vegas baby!" - "Fireworks are going to be set off from the roofs of seven hotels along the Strip at midnight and this is one of them. Now, back to someone else who is somewhere else in Vegas with more drunk people". I'm absolutely sure she said that, even if not in those exact words. So I set up camp facing the far south end of the Strip. This is what it actually looked like a couple of minutes after midnight: Right there in the Luxor's tractor beam you can see smoke drifting across from the fireworks - as they shot up from the roof... of the MGM Grand. Mandalay Bay was never supposed to be one of the seven. They were: MGM Grand, Planet Hollywood, Flamingo, Venetian, Treasure Island, Circus Circus and Stratosphere. This is the most direct pyro shot I could get: That's the CityCenter construction, illuminated by some badly obstructed fireworks. MGM is behind there somewhere, but you just can't see any of its green glow. This really doesn't look like Vegas at all, if it wasn't for the Bellagio sign in the foreground it really could be anywhere!

Posted by luckydonut in Las Vegas December 07 at 09:13