

Online Poker - 2017

The participation of Australians in online poker

My name is Ian Kerry, I am a 47 year old happily married man with a son and daughter and I have been playing online poker for the past six years and have thoroughly enjoy it. It is my hobby and main pastime. I find it rewarding because I'm able to study the game through reading, watching educational videos and sharing ideas with others. I spend as much time improving my poker abilities as I do playing.

I was drawn to the combination of game theory and mathematic probabilities that underpin the game, meaning that skill was a major part of the game.

I'm a busy family man so I have difficulty playing poker 'live' so the idea of staying home and playing poker online is very important.

Unlike other forms of gambling where you play against the house poker allows you to interact with others from all over the world and locally. Over the years of playing I've formed some 'real life' friendships with other players I've met online. This extends to nights out or even staying with them when in their home town. I have also discovered poker forums online (2+2 poker forum is the main one) where poker strategy is discussed and a substantial community of players exists. You can visit these forums to see – generally there is a friendly community of players willing to help each other develop their game as well as provide much broader (life) advice.

Also poker promotes 'bankroll management' which means it's very hard to play beyond your means compared to other forms of online gambling.

I agree that casino websites should be banned because they do not promote community and it's very easy to lose money and there is no skill involved. Therefore the opportunity to turn this type of gambling into a major positive pastime is near impossible, unlike poker.

From what I understand, poker is towards the benign end of the spectrum of gambling options (there are academic studies that support this) and certainly from what I have experienced and witnessed, I have not encountered any examples of lives being ruined / significantly disrupted due to poker, as opposed to other forms of gambling.

From my own experience, poker has reduced my risk of having a gambling problem from medium/low to negligible/zero. I will explain why because it allowed me to have a positive alternative to other forms of gambling, including sports betting.

In terms of benefits, for me there have been many from my online poker experiences:

Well developed understanding of game theory, which helps in other games I play but also in real/work life:

Improved mathematics skills – beyond basic numeracy, particularly in the understanding of statistics, probability and variance.

People / relationship skills – the poker world is full of colourful and interesting characters. Of course, it has the odd unpleasant sort – bad losers, or aggressive individuals. What I've enjoyed is watching skilled poker players dealing with these types in very effective ways. One of the things that regular poker players do is make the playing environment a pleasant one, for all involved, it is in our interests to do so. That means if, on occasion, players get out of hand, I will do what I can to help manage bad tempers. Often this is done with careful humour and some empathy. In reality this is a rarity and mostly strangers are chatting, having a laugh, discussing the game and learning about other cultures.

Analytical skills – most players will look over their hand histories to consider where they have played well and where they could improve. Analysing results, considering which games, times, strategies, opponents etc. will derive the greatest profit /results is all part of the game, and developing these analytical skills has extended into my normal working life.

Reading bluffers – One common question I get asked about playing online is how do you read someone bluffing? The answer is not straightforward but I usually relay to people there are 'tells' even online – for example how long it takes someone to act following a bet into them. A longer response time can indicate something just as an instant response time can do, however these can be faked too so caution has to be applied, just as in an in-person game. More interesting perhaps is the 'detective' approach where the story told by a player in his or her betting patterns just doesn't make sense considering the way the hand develops. All of these techniques applied to spotting a bluff can be applied in real life, non-poker situations. As I learnt the game more I was surprised to see how many parallels existed with the non-poker world. I would consider that I am significantly better at reading people in the real world as a result of the skills I've developed through poker.

Increasing my network – I've made a few friends through poker, probably with people I'd never have met or clicked with if it wasn't for poker. We enjoy discussing hands and difficult game situations.

Dealing with life's ups and downs – Even the best players will have periods of 'running bad' or running below expectation due to variance. Learning to maintain composure, keep patience, and to 'tough it out' through these periods has built my resilience to deal with similar experiences in real life. Just as in poker, life can deal you some bad cards and I've learnt that this is all down to life's variance and I don't feel like I'm cursed or a victim when this happens to me; instead I understand that I should keep doing the right thing and then things will improve over time. Similarly, I could run well or above expectations (in poker and in life) and my experience from poker has taught me not to let this go to my head, get carried away and begin to overestimate my own capabilities.

Whether the current regulatory approach, in particular, the recently amended Interactive Gambling Act 2001, is a reasonable and proportionate response to those harms and benefits.

I was very surprised to learn about the blunt, misguided and totally inappropriate response to the technological developments surround online gambling. I consider that the proposed regulations relating to online poker completely disproportionate to the risk they are attempting to mitigate. Worse still, I believe the regulations as they are currently proposed will actually be counter-productive and drive more harm than benefit. It appears that these misguided proposed regulations reflect a misunderstanding of online poker and cannot be supported by logic or reason. There are several reasons I am drawn to this conclusion.

First, due to technology advances, it will be a regulation that is near-impossible to enforce. It is well understood within the poker community that utilising a VPN will allow players to continue to access certain providers who are not strict in ensuring that Australian players cannot play on their sites. This means that these unregulated providers will pay no tax, will not bring additional benefits to the Australian economy, such as establishing offices, marketing spend etc. and worst of all Australian players will not be provided with protection against unscrupulous providers. A simple comparison with other developed economies will indicate that this is a non-seneschal way to proceed – no other developed economy has opted for a full ban on online poker (the US did for a short while, but that was reversed within 2 years). We all know that prohibition on something people are passionate about just doesn't work.

The UK considered this issue recently and after an extensive study introduced regulations that are regarded as highly effective - the Gambling (Licensing and Advertising) Act 2014. Through these regulations, companies and players alike are provided certainty and a fair playing field, taxation can be applied and protection for players can be enforced. Furthermore, significant issues such as money laundering can be managed through appropriate KYC (Know Your Customer) checks and similarly under-age participation can be controlled appropriately. It strikes me as staggering, given that this work and thinking had been completed that Australia doesn't learn/ leverage from this as it has with many other regulations it has successfully and effectively adopted from other jurisdictions. For the record, I would support the full adoption of the UK regulations in Australia.

Secondly, I cannot understand how it can be justified that other forms of gambling, which clearly present greater threats to individuals in terms of creating personal issues for them, are allowed to continue whilst online poker would face an outright ban. This smacks of lazy legislation that lumps together various forms of gambling without proper consideration of differences between them.

In conclusion, online poker is perhaps my favourite hobby and very important to me and thousands of other Australians. I have played online for six years and it has benefited me in many ways as well as given me much enjoyment. I agree online casino gambling should be banned but to include poker which requires a good level of skill is completely unjustified. I have spent several hours composing this submission and I hope that the points made within it are given due consideration.

Thank you

Ian Kerry