

# A Player's Guide to Not Really Playing: The Ins and Outs of Fake Poker

By Pete Sweeney

So you've heard the bad news. Gambling is still illegal. Well, if you gamble to win money, first, you need to take another course in probability, but there's nothing else I can recommend except Atlantic City. However, if you gamble just to talk smack and drink drinks with leggy blondes—or stumpy blue-haired hags with sciatica, whatever—there's hope yet.

Jill Snyder, a manager at Fado on 7<sup>th</sup> Street, can help. She runs a sort of methadone clinic for gamblers every Wednesday, passing out \$400 of (valueless) chips and patting the losers gently on the head. “You can always tell the regular gamblers,” she says. “Absolutely. They're the first people at the table waiting for us to start. They're usually the ones who get furious when they lose.”

Like any ordinary drug peddler, Jill is popular and the regulars know her name and respect her authority. “If I tell them to do something,” she says, “they're usually pretty good about it. Sometimes they get a little . . . too involved in play, as if they're losing a million dollars.” She smiles at the thought. She wanders around yelling out the rules and passing out the chips to what I must say is an eclectic mixture of people, even for DC. Irishmen, Peruvians, lawyers, tribesmen; men, women, geezers, munchkins; the dumb, the crippled, the crazed, and the merely eccentric—we all sit together meekly sipping, waiting for our chips to arrive in Ziploc bags.

Texas Hold 'Em is structured to encourage aggressive betting, because you don't know whether you actually have a good hand or a bad hand until the bets have gone around several times. That's why it's such a good indicator of negotiating style. For example, Richard Nixon financed his first congressional bid with his Texas Hold 'Em winnings, which just goes to show you that the art of bullshitting can take you far. Of course Nixon's subsequent career also serves as a warning as to the limits of the bluff. But at Fado, where people

aren't betting real money, when there are no real consequences to the bluff except arguably a lower bar tab, the whole dynamic swings to the fringe. I make it to the final table, more or less accidentally, and watch some seven hands go by without seeing a card face up. Guys are throwing down huge sums before they even see their hands, trying to grab the pot with their testicles. I say “guys” because there is one girl sitting there, Christine, who wants nothing to do with it. She and her boyfriend are regulars at Fado poker and routinely make it to the top table. While I watch yet another testosterone-laden pot build in front of me, I ask her whether guys play poker differently from girls. “Not really,” she says. Then immediately reconsiders. “Well, playing against girls, I do get into less pissing contests like this one.”

My friend Shelley is already somewhat drunk; like most of those knocked out of play early, it's difficult to tell which caused which. She's suspicious of Christine's vee neck shirt. “Don't be distracted by the cleavage,” she hisses in my ear. I give it the old college try, but it's all for naught, especially given that I never tried ignoring cleavage in college. Christine takes her time before wading in to the macho mess the game has become, but when she does, she knocks me clean out in one of the best hands played that night; I was winning until the last card, which gave her a straight. Texas Hold 'Em can have that last-minute salvation drama, much like baseball. “I told you to look out for the cleavage!” I, um, misunderstood. Bartender!

Better, perhaps, to play at home. They sell green baize cloth at any fabric store, and you only have to buy it once. Slap it on your folding table, throw down the chips, the cards; pass the Sam's Club bulk appetizers, pour things in martini glasses, and you have a respectable-looking operation you can use to abuse the credulous and swindle the outright foolish. There's lots of ways to do it. I had a blackjack night once to allegedly benefit some cause or other—something involving or-

phans, I seem to recollect—so everyone happily lost their very real money to the house. “The house” being my house, I went out and blew it all on hydroponic KB. Suckers!

The other way to do the poker thing is to break the law and go old school. You rent the motel room with the round table, get some scotch, one of those twelve foot sandwiches, charge a light cover for the cost, and go all out, g. Bring some guns to add tension. This is the way poker should be played; in dump motels with Chevrolet sedans; in pleather jackets with ammo clips. I mean, I like Fado's concept fine as practice, but removing risk from poker is like stripping Christ's blood from the altar wine. Why drink it if it's not sacred?

But unlike communion, motel poker's expensive. While you do pay retail for your drinks at Fado, you aren't actually losing money at the same time, and they don't charge you for the room. And such poker purity sacrifices the people-watching pleasure of Fado: the indoor sunglasses, the chirpy bimbettes, and of course all that shit-talking between perfect strangers. And then there's the strange sensation of waking up from a nightmare of lost money and dashed hopes to realize it wasn't worth anything anyway, and all you owe is your bar tab.

