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“Feruell” is near the top of poker’s food chain. A professional from Russia, he makes a living gambling anonymously on GGPoker, Americas Cardroom and other sites, sometimes using Darth Vader as his avatar. Fellow sharks and smaller fish with money to lose are his prey. Feruell keeps his emotions in check during games, but he’s outspoken in poker forums when he sees something he doesn’t like.

In 2013 another player caught his eye. Vyacheslav Karpov, aka Performer, was

posting lurid tales in a Russian-language chatroom about prostitutes and card tricks he'd learned from "gypsies." To the cerebral Feruell, Karpov's boasting looked ridiculous. Even worse, he was charging young male acolytes for the privilege of receiving his advice, including how to cure anxiety with booze.

Feruell logged on to the chatroom and accused Performer of telling "fairy tales" to "collect \$50 an hour from suckers." He added that Karpov "doesn't know how to play poker."

Karpov threw down a gauntlet: "I challenge you to a fight."

The duel he proposed was in Limit Texas Hold 'em, a variant in which two cards are

dealt to each player, then five more cards are dealt face up, interspersed with rounds of betting in which the maximum raise is capped. This happens to be Feruell's specialty—he's been called the "King of Limit." The match was set up on the PokerStars website. Bets would max out at \$200.

Feruell doesn't lose often. But when the game began, pot after pot went to Karpov. Some 400 hands later, the match was over, with the King of Limit down \$20,000. "His level of play was out of this world," Feruell later recalled.

**Big Take**

3 Best Poker Bots

The Ge

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He was suspicious right away. How could he have been outsmarted by a guy who ranted about homosexuals taking over the world? Although Feruell couldn't prove anything, he guessed Karpov had used software to direct his moves. Poker-playing programs—poker bots—had been around for decades, but for most of that time they hadn't been good enough to beat top human competitors.

Feruell and Karpov both made their names in the boom era of online poker, which kicked off in 2003 after a Tennessee accountant with the improbable name of Chris Moneymaker won the World Series of Poker in Las Vegas. Moneymaker inspired millions around the world to try their luck, just as online poker sites emerged to make it easy to do so. These hobbyists were happy to pay good money to test their skills. Maybe they'd even win a little and then—why not?—make it to the World Series of Poker themselves.



MONEYMAKER AFTER WINNING THE MAIN EVENT AT THE 2003 WORLD SERIES OF POKER IN LAS VEGAS. *PHOTOGRAPHER: ERIC HARKINS*

Throughout this era, players could be reasonably confident that the people on the other side of the virtual table were, in fact, people. But Feruell had good reason to be suspicious. As researchers were using virtual poker to push the limits of

artificial intelligence, machines were creeping into the online game. Some unscrupulous operators used software to cheat. Bots began to proliferate and contribute to the game's decline. By 2019, the same year a bot designed by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University humbled five pros in a mini-tournament, Morgan Stanley analysts warned that AI was an existential threat to the online poker market, still worth around \$3 billion today. The rise of “superhuman poker bots in the online ecosystem now appears to be a matter of when, not if,” their report read. That day has arrived. Advanced poker software is now widely available for a few hundred dollars. Forums are full of accusations about everyone from anonymous, low-stakes fish to sponsored

professionals. All the big platforms promote a zero-tolerance policy, but no one seems to know how many bots are out there or where they come from. “It’s a scourge,” one gambling executive told me. When I started investigating poker bots, I came across an obscure chatroom thread posted by a whistleblower describing an operation so large it resembled an international corporation. It had a board of directors, training programs and an HR department—everything, it seemed, but a water cooler. Allegedly based in Siberia, the group was said to have absorbed all potential rivals in the region, becoming known as Bot Farm Corporation, or BF Corp. “You can’t do anything about it,” wrote the whistleblower, who seemed to

have inside knowledge. “A machine is always stronger than a man.”

I was intrigued but wary. The poker community, pumped up with testosterone and greed, is rife with conspiracy theories. One high-profile player had to go on camera with the website *PokerNews* to deny running a cheating cult fueled by hallucinogenic frog poison. The paranoia results, in part, from a lack of information. Neither professionals nor poker providers want to acknowledge the presence of intelligent machines for fear of deterring the new players whose money keeps the game afloat.

I decided to find out the truth about BF Corp., by following a trail of leaked internal emails and legal and corporate

filings, and by conducting interviews with players, gambling executives, security consultants and botmakers. When I finally tracked down BF's Siberian creators, they reluctantly agreed to an interview. They turned out to be more deeply embedded in the poker industry than I could have imagined. And, far from ruining the game, they told me they wanted to save it.

POKER INVOLVES BOTH LUCK AND

skill. That's key to its appeal. If I were to challenge the world's top golfer, Scottie Scheffler, there could be only one result. The contest would be pointless and embarrassing for all involved. But as a below-average participant in the occasional late-night card game with friends, I *might* have a chance against

reigning World Series of Poker winner Jonathan Tamayo, at least for a few hands. I could fluke my way into four aces or play so incompetently that he struggled to interpret my strategy.

This sense of possibility is what draws in new blood, from frat-house amateurs to millionaires staking huge sums to take on elite players. A lot of people think they're smart enough to win online. Without these players putting in money, the professionals wouldn't earn a profit, the websites wouldn't get a percentage of the action—the rake, in poker parlance—and the game's economy would collapse.

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But over the long run, skill outweighs luck. A key advantage is mathematical talent: the ability to calculate the probability of winning a pot, based on variables such as hand strength, number of players and one's position at the table.

The students who founded BF Corp. were just this type of player. Hailing from Omsk, a city that serves as a gateway to the frozen wilderness of Siberia, they were computer gamers who studied math, physics and economics. With the digital poker boom in full swing, one of them convinced the others they could make serious money. (This and other details about the group were confirmed by early members, who, like many Russian sources for this article,

asked not to be identified, citing the political situation in their home country.) Poker collectives were springing up across former Soviet territories, where colleges were traditionally strong in science and technology, and wages were low enough to make gambling attractive. “Poker is about mathematics and self-discipline,” Maxim Katz, who ran one such group from Moscow, told me. “That’s two things Russians are good at.”



**OMSK, WHERE THE RUSSIAN POKER AI WAS
CREATED. PHOTOGRAPHER: ALEXEY
MALGAVKO/REUTERS**

The Omsk students borrowed money from their parents and began staking other friends in return for a cut of their profits. They trained using pieces of dried pasta as chips. The winner got a meal; losers went hungry. A university lecturer came in to

give off-books lessons in probability theory; others taught game theory. By a year or two in, about 50 students were coming to the dorm each evening to work the night shift.

The poker sites worked much like they do now. Players registered, deposited funds and joined a digitally rendered green felt table. The software shuffled and dealt.

Participants could see their opponents' decisions—raise, call, fold—but not their cards. Anything from a few dollars to hundreds or thousands could be at stake, depending on the site and whether a tournament was running. Crucially, everyone was identified by only a first name or pseudonym, and normally by a cartoon avatar. That meant hapless Americans logging on after work had no

idea they were playing against Russian kids trained in the mathematical dark arts. One night a neighbor called the police, convinced terrorists were using the building, which was lit up at all hours with scruffy young men streaming in and out. The students invited officers inside to see banks of computer screens. There's no terrorism, they explained. Just games.

Soon, the group connected with a similar operation from another technical college in Siberia and agreed to merge. Greater scale meant bigger pots and bigger profits. They attracted external investors, including Svyatoslav Kapustin, a local real estate tycoon, according to records from Russian companies associated with the group and other sources. (Emails sent to

companies affiliated with Kapustin went unanswered.) They also recruited professional players, including Petr “Rus” Vlasenko, who’d won the 2006 PartyPoker St. Petersburg Open and coached other pros for \$1,000 a session. Vlasenko had developed a mathematical approach to assess the odds in each hand. He came to Omsk, where one of the group’s founders persuaded him to teach his method to a programmer in the hope of creating software that replicated his skills. Eventually, Vlasenko became a key member of the team.



ARTHUR SAMUEL AT IBM, WHERE HE DEVELOPED SOFTWARE CAPABLE OF PLAYING CHECKERS AT A HIGH LEVEL.

SOURCE: IBM



KASPAROV PLAYING DEEP BLUE IN NEW YORK CITY IN 1997. *PHOTOGRAPHER: ADAM NADEL/AP PHOTO*

Scientists had been trying to crack poker since at least the 1940s. That decade, researchers successfully trained 10-ton prototype computers to play checkers, creating arguably the first functioning AI. Chinook, a program designed at the University of Alberta, defeated the world

checkers champion in 1994—a victory that prompted a journalist from a Christian newspaper to ask its programmer, “Are you the devil?” Chess fell in 1997 to IBM Corp.’s Deep Blue machine, which could review 200 million positions per second, more than enough to beat grandmaster Garry Kasparov.

Poker proved vastly more complicated. A game can have as many as 10 players, and each participant faces multiple decisions, from folding a hand to going all-in. The number of potential scenarios in a single game of No-Limit Texas Hold ’em is greater than the number of atoms in the universe. What’s more, poker involves guessing what type of hand an opponent is holding, taking cues from behavior (even online) and bluffing convincingly about your own

hand—that is, lying. Computers, designed to plow through huge datasets, aren’t good at this.

AROUND 2012, DAVID FAIRLAMB, A former casino executive from Michigan, was mentoring at a business school in Moscow when he encountered a curious group of students from Siberia. They struck Fairlamb, who speaks fluent Russian, as introverted nerds who conversed in the mechanical language of computer programming. Their names didn’t stick with him, but their area of expertise did. They’d developed groundbreaking poker technology and were looking for ways to exploit it.

By then, several people in the Omsk group told me, they’d built probably the world’s

most advanced poker-playing software and were deploying it profitably on every major poker website. In only a few years, they'd managed to substitute the human talent in their operation with an alternative that didn't need to eat or sleep; that could connect automatically to a platform with minimal supervision by the founders and their friends; and that could sift through millions of potential scenarios to find the best move from a 3-terabyte database of past games, right down to exploiting a given opponent's tendencies based on their record of play.

Fairlamb told me he didn't know anything about the botting operation in Siberia. The deal he struck with the students was, to him, about their technology's broad commercial potential. With his

encouragement, the group decided to test their system against the world's best bots, entering the Annual Computer Poker Competition in 2012 and 2013 under the name Neo Poker Lab. They competed against two leading research hubs—Carnegie Mellon in Pittsburgh and the University of Alberta's Computer Poker Research Group—as well as other assorted academics and tech hobbyists.

Organizers uploaded all the bots to a central server, then ran hundreds of millions of hands, pitting bot against bot as they folded, checked and raised over and over in the fraction of the time it takes a human to blink. The system behind Neo, the group told competition planners, relied on “neural networks, regret minimization and gradient search

equilibrium approximation, decision trees [and] recursive search methods as well as expert algorithms from [a] professional poker player.” In plain English, that meant the software had played itself millions of times, learning from its mistakes and successes much the same way people do, except at mind-boggling scale.

The Neo bot was adapted to play other machines. It was built on pure game theory, a specialty at the students’ technical universities. Applied to poker, game theory helps computers overcome their main weakness: lying. Its formulas calculate precisely when and how often to bluff to maximize the chances of victory, while minimizing “tells”—play patterns that can help opponents guess what someone is holding. Game theory can

produce a poker strategy that's as close to perfect as it's possible to get.

Academics were also tapping into its power, but the Russians had found an edge. Neo placed in several categories in 2013 and won a head-to-head Limit Texas Hold 'em contest, pushing the vaunted Alberta bot into second.

The victory gave Fairlamb something to promote back in the US alongside some prototype consumer software the Siberians had built: a poker-training program featuring cartoon characters from the TV show *Futurama*. The product won a startup award at the 2014 Global iGaming Summit and Expo in San Francisco. Fairlamb's wife attended the ceremony dressed as a glamorous robot.

Fairlamb persuaded other American gambling executives to join what was now a fledgling company. “Within nine months, we’ll have a fully completed release of the game,” Neo’s then-Chairman Rob Gallo told a journalist in Las Vegas. The same article touted Chris Moneymaker, poker’s most famous son, as an adviser to Neo’s management team, a claim that also appeared on the company’s website for years.



MONEymaker Playing Online POKER IN NASHVILLE IN 2003. PHOTOGRAPHER: JOHN RUSSELL/AP PHOTO

Moneymaker, however, told me he knew nothing about this. He said he'd never had any connection to Neo and didn't even know his name had been used. Gallo, who knew Moneymaker socially, said he wasn't sure who'd connected the poker

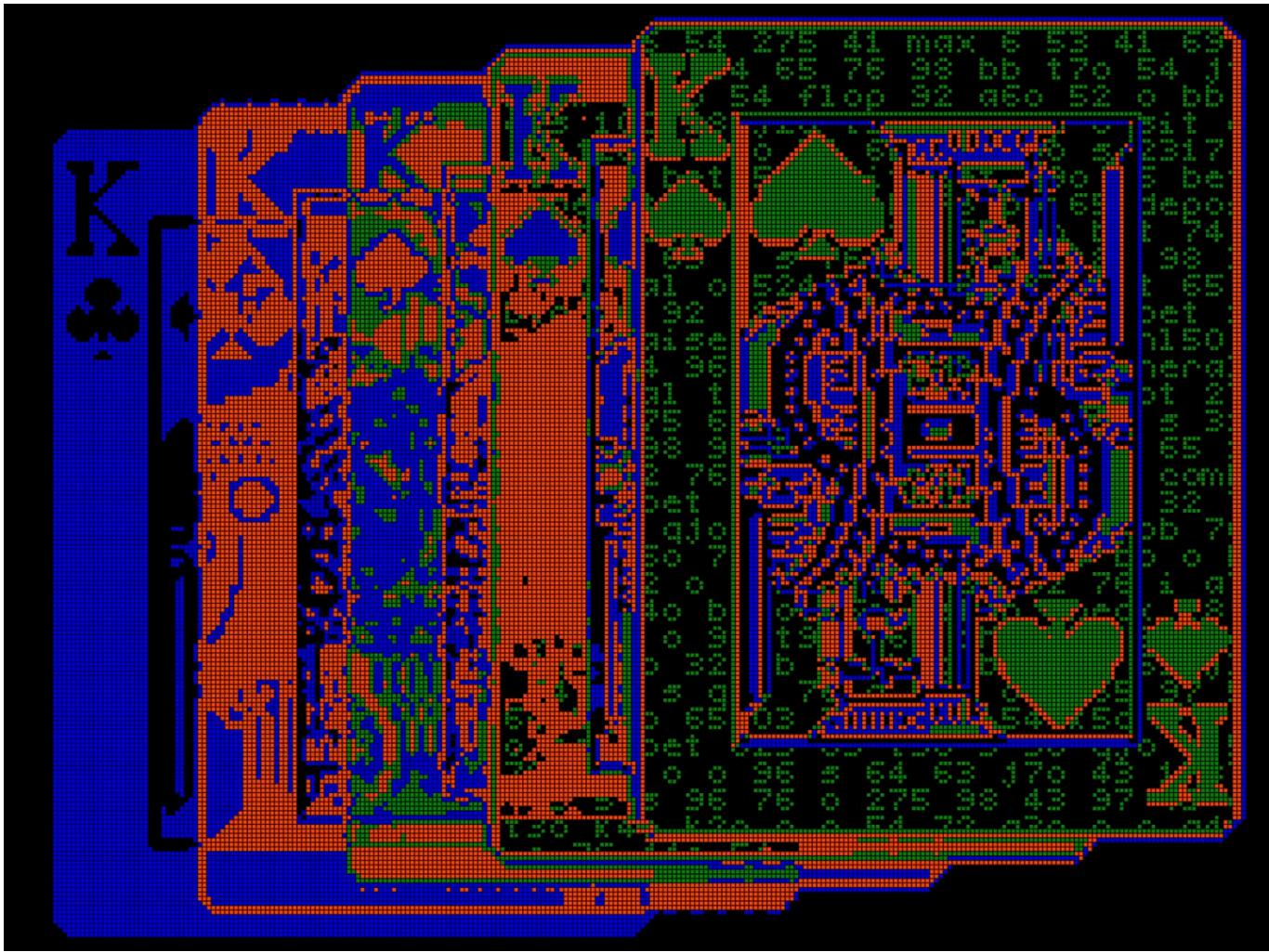
champion's name to the project. (He also told me, like Fairlamb, that he knew nothing about a botting operation in Russia.)

Whoever was responsible, the attempt to inject some star power didn't help. The poker-training software never amounted to anything, failing to lure investors or paying customers. Fairlamb and Gallo parted ways with the effort, and both told me they don't know what the Russians did next.

As Neo was winding down, in 2015, University of Alberta scientists announced that they'd "solved" two-player Limit Hold 'em. Their Cepheus bot had run more hands against itself than the entire human race had played since the game's

inception, they said. They claimed that, for all practical purposes, it was unbeatable. “It plays like God,” journalist Oliver Roeder wrote in his book *Seven Games: A Human History*.

Cepheus was a landmark achievement in the history of machine intelligence. Reading the news from Russia, the Omsk crew were a little annoyed they’d never gotten a rematch, an associate told me. But they’d long since stopped bothering with scientific posturing. Poker isn’t really poker without money at stake, and the Russian bot farmers knew that better than anyone.



BEFORE CEPHEUS , POKER WEBSITES

didn't take botting that seriously. The technology wasn't good enough, and they had more serious problems. In 2011 American authorities shut down the three most popular sites, Absolute Poker, Full Tilt Poker and PokerStars, accusing them of breaching US gambling laws. The cases

were eventually settled with no admission of wrongdoing by the companies, but the moves threw online poker into a kind of legal limbo. Many operators kept going by fleeing to Costa Rica, Curaçao and other locations.

The industry persisted, though, and by 2015 it was adopting security measures to detect and exclude bots. It wasn't that using software to play poker was illegal, apart from perhaps in casinos in Nevada, where a state law forbidding gambling devices already existed. It was, however, cheating. Players have always hated bots. The game is supposed to be a battle of wits, not of computing power. Virtually all poker sites now forbid bots in their terms of use and shutter the accounts and seize

the funds of anyone suspected of employing them.

The problem is, how do you spot a bot? The best pros can execute close to game-theory-optimal poker, so filtering for win rate or playing style isn't necessarily enough. Initially the sites tried methods such as monitoring online chat boxes to see if players talked like humans and tracking cursor movements to see if they matched the way people use a mouse. To get around these defenses, the Siberians hired programmers to tweak their software, according to several people from the organization. Soon their bots could simulate the jiggling mouse movements of a person at a desk, generate convincing chatter when prompted and even

randomize the time they took to make a decision, imitating natural hesitation. In response to such advances, “game integrity” specialists learned to dig deeper into players’ habits using analytics. A player’s style is as individual as a fingerprint. Across hundreds of hands, no two people will make exactly the same choices. If websites detected two players folding, checking and raising at the same rate, they were bots. If they detected even more players doing so, that was a bot farm. Online vigilantes got in on the act, reviewing game data and flagging suspicious activity in poker forums.

This scrutiny posed a problem in Omsk. Accounts were now being banned, dozens at a time, after only a few days of play.

Facing extinction, the group's leaders began outsourcing the operation of bot accounts to partners who paid for access to the software, which the group referred to internally as "the brain." It was around this time that the group earned the name Bot Farm Corporation.

The partners who ran the farms acted like independent franchisees. Typically they'd rent office space and computers, hiring employees to operate the software. The partners also needed hundreds of real people to open "clean" accounts for the bots to use, supplying proof of ID if required. BF Corp. offered a menu of different brains, tailored to high- or low-stakes games, or to variants such as Omaha or five-card stud.

The software could run fully automated or with a human operator implementing decisions from a machine running in the background, to confound sites' bot detection systems. Having a human face proved ideal for online tournaments where organizers were known to ask competitors to prove they were flesh and blood by recording a video of themselves playing. If a partner's farm was caught and barred, they could just shut it down and start over with new accounts.

Internal chats from BF that were leaked on a Russian poker forum and Telegram show the operation's scale during this period, as well as the level of subterfuge it was deploying. In the transcripts, about 600 users with aliases such as Dallas and Zeon

discuss overseeing accounts in Canada, China, India, Poland and Sweden, using virtual private networks or local SIM cards to disguise the operators' real location.

Someone using the name Musicant reported running so many bots that they ended up at the same online tables, playing against one another.

Many of the first partners were Russian poker players or bloggers who'd heard about BF through word of mouth and had an online fan base to provide a steady supply of clean accounts. One of them was Feruell's nemesis, Vyacheslav Karpov. Karpov's farm was large enough that BF classified him as a "premium user," according to someone who saw the group's internal database. And he had access to the brain during his 2013 showdown

against Feruell, another source confirmed. A few years later, in 2016, Karpov posted a message from PokerStars' security team saying he'd been kicked off the site for using prohibited software. He called the accusation "nonsense," saying, "This is normal for me. I just have this game strategy. I leave scorched earth. Until I win everything, I won't stop."

I got hold of Karpov's contact details and messaged him to say I'd be reporting on his use of poker bots and his links to BF Corp. He responded with a question: "How often do you think about suicide?" When I pushed him for comment, he accused me of being unnatural "in a doggy style" and offered up some questionable views on the role of women in society before blocking my number. He signed off with these

words: “Son, when I was 16 years old, I ate people like you for breakfast.”

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BF CORP. EVENTUALLY CONCLUDED

that it was too difficult and time-consuming to work directly with partners such as Karpov. Starting around 2018, the founders decided to sell their software as a computer or smartphone app, leaving customers to decide how they used the technology. This strategy meant the group didn't have to expend resources finding ways to avoid detection by websites and could spend more on developing the underlying AI. A new golden period began.

Some of the partners became distributors, spreading BF's bots far and wide. NZT Poker, named after the superintelligence pill Bradley Cooper's character takes in the movie *Limitless*, had its own Facebook and Instagram pages, plus chat services on

WhatsApp and Telegram. Its Russian-language website claimed to have 10,000 customers. “No more tough decisions or stressed burnouts. Just follow green hints and make money,” its YouTube channel stated. NZT’s software came from BF Corp., according to a source inside the Omsk group. (NZT didn’t respond to messages seeking comment.)

The Russians were still digging for gold, only now they were “selling shovels,” as they were referring to it in Siberia. At the group’s peak, they were making more than \$10 million annually from selling access to their system, a BF member boasted to a friend in one of the conversations leaked online. Some of those profits were spent experimenting with new, unexpected ways to exploit the AI, both inside and outside

the poker economy. Until now, the Siberians had approached poker sites like bandits, hiding in the shadows and plundering whatever they could. But what if they offered a service the industry actually wanted?

As I investigated what they did next, I stumbled across online poker's dirty secret: Not all bots are unwelcome. Alex Scott, president of the company that runs the World Poker Tour, explained it to me. Customers loathe bots and won't spend money playing them, he said. But all accounts, including bots, generate revenue. Poker sites make money from the rake, taking a small percentage of the pot in each hand. Even as they have rules forbidding bots, they have little incentive to care who wins or how. Bots are also

useful for keeping games running around the clock, providing what insiders call “liquidity,” as customers prefer to join active tables rather than wait at empty ones. “You can’t run an online poker business without liquidity, and bots can provide that,” Scott said. Companies he’d worked for hadn’t used them, he noted, but he suspected smaller sites did.

BF Corp.’s founders spotted the opportunity early, opening offices in Novosibirsk and St. Petersburg, and recruiting marketing professionals to sell the product. In 2020 they created a company called Deeplay. Its mission was to “provide a comfortable environment for gamers,” according to its website. “Our robots employ different strategies to maintain in-game balance.”

Deeplay recruited hundreds of coders and analysts, some of whom didn't even know the core business was poker when they were hired. Its offices looked like those of any other tech startup, with massage chairs and Christmas parties with free steak and vodka, and no sign of playing cards or other gambling-themed décor. The company pitched itself not merely as a poker business but as an AI-powered data solutions provider for a range of corporate needs. Of the half-dozen ex-Deeplay staff I spoke with, only one knew about its origins in Siberia.

Many of Deeplay's clients were poker clubs. A relatively recent phenomenon in online poker, these privately run games could skirt legal prohibitions on gambling

transactions by selling tokens or charging membership fees instead of taking rake directly. Clubs are popular in jurisdictions with restrictive betting laws, such as China and the US. Anyone can start one using off-the-shelf software, and the largest clubs rival mainstream poker websites in popularity. Deeplay's bots could help club operators attract new members by making sure there were always active tables to join. The company also offered game analysis and, ironically, anti-bot security, to keep interlopers away.

Some former Deeplay employees told me that once its bots were operating at poker club tables, they could make money at the expense of real users. Others said the skill level could be adjusted down, allowing humans to win just enough so they stayed

at tables longer, spending more money. Deeplay would get a fee for providing this technology or take a share of the increased revenue. It's unclear whether any of Deeplay's clients knew they were in business with an offshoot of perhaps the largest cheating operation in the history of poker.

I couldn't find a single poker club or traditional website that openly admitted to running internal bots or having a relationship with Deeplay. "It's a complicated question," one gambling executive responded when I asked whether liquidity bots were ethical. "I know of other platforms that use bots." I asked the top five poker websites the same thing. They all either denied any connection to the practice, declined to

comment or didn't respond. Messages sent to official channels at Deeplay went unreturned.

The average poker enthusiast today can't really know whether their online opponent is a person or a machine. Game security isn't infallible, even on the big platforms. "This is an arms race against some very motivated individuals,"

PokerStars said in a 2023 blog post. At a recent tournament with a \$12.5 million prize pool, run by Winning Poker Network, a unit of Americas Cardroom, the second-place player was disqualified midevent on suspicion of botting. "I believe there is no clean game online," Vitaly Lunkin, a Russian professional, told me.

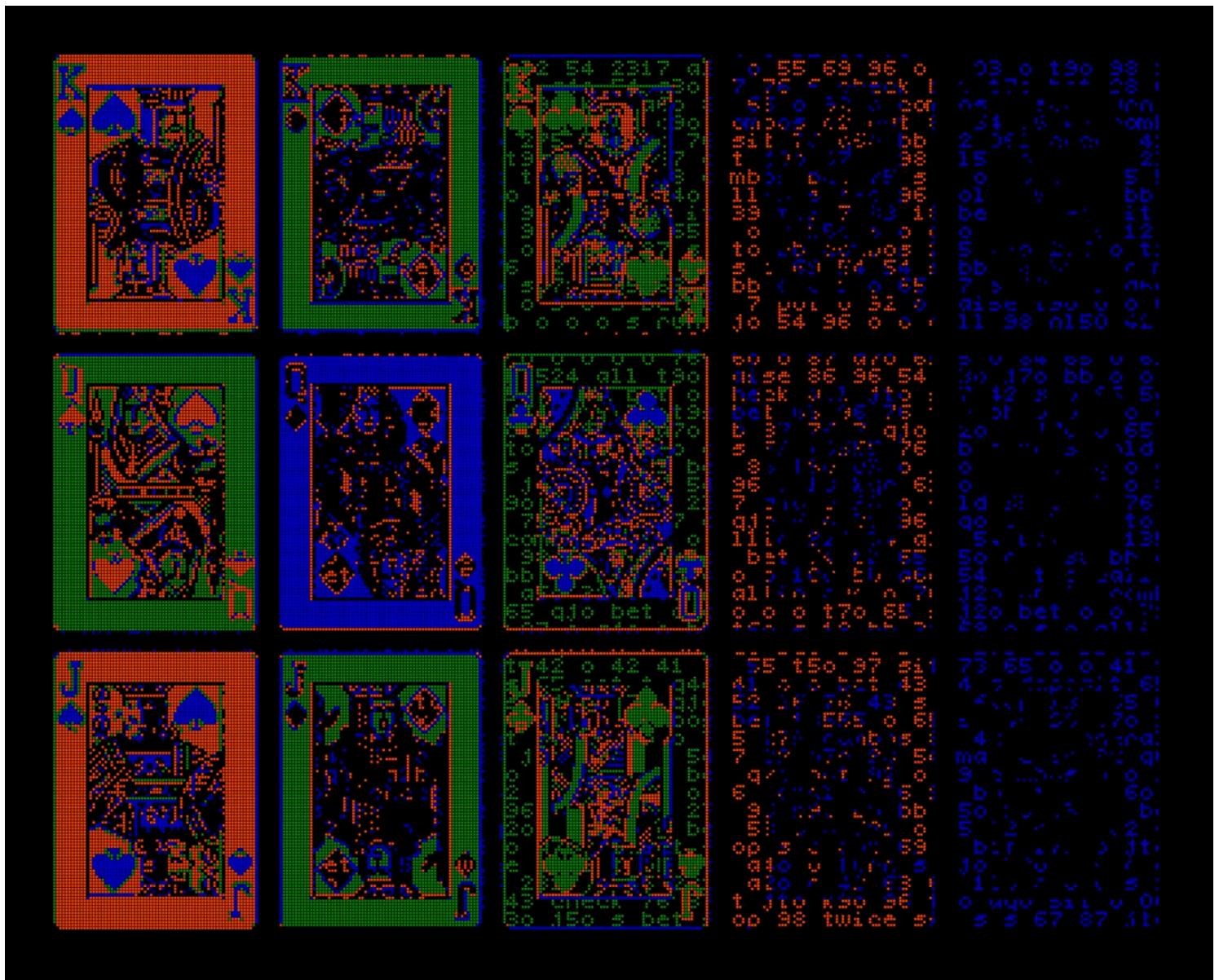
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At the same time, most top players use software to train themselves to play with the efficiency of robots, in real life and online. The game is now less about psychology, spectacular bluffs or calls, and more about revealing as little as possible to opponents and grinding out the

percentages. Machines have taught us to play better, more boring poker. This new reality made me think of bots as a virus, attacking the body of online poker. Over time, some viruses evolve to shed their predatory traits, and the host's biology absorbs them as they weave themselves permanently into the genome. Perhaps it's the same with poker, and online players should learn to live with bots.

Or maybe the Morgan Stanley analysts were right in 2019 and the game is slowly destroying itself. There's no doubt the boom Chris Moneymaker inspired is over. Traffic is down from its peak, apart from a spike during the Covid-19 pandemic, when half the world was stuck at home.

Moneymaker himself told me AI and bots represent a massive threat to the industry he helped make. “It might end up killing the whole online poker world eventually,” he said.



EARLIER THIS YEAR, AFTER MONTHS

spent interviewing anyone I could find connected to BF Corp., Neo or Deeplay, a new group chat popped up in the encrypted messaging service I was using. “Hi Kit. We hear uve been looking for neo core ppl for quite some time.”

They called themselves the “Neo pokerists” and said they were founding members. They were thinking about breaking their silence: “Weve decided that its better to have a conversation instead of sitting in the shadows.”

After a protracted negotiation, we arranged to meet in the Armenian capital of Yerevan. I agreed not to publish their full names. Doing so would put their safety

at risk in Russia, they said. They'd planned a series of touristy activities so we could get to know each other better, and the morning after I landed, they pulled up in two SUVs with tinted windows.

I didn't know what to expect, but in person they seemed more worried about me and how my story might affect them than I was about them. There was Alex, a shaven-headed Muscovite with hip glasses and designer clothes. Vova and Valentin were both from Siberia. They'd been original members of the student poker collectives in Omsk. Vova, who had the distinctive sloping shoulders of someone who spends a lot of time in front of a computer, had been studying accounting at the time. Valentin, lean and twitchy, was the most gifted player of the three. In his

youth, he said, he'd been able to run 17 online games simultaneously and still make money.

Seeking a quiet place for the interview, we drove to a vineyard in the shadow of Mount Ararat, still snowcapped in the June sunshine. There, Alex, Valentin and Vova talked me through their poker careers and their vision for the future, speaking either in English or with Alex acting as interpreter.

BF Corp., Neo Poker Lab and Deepay—it was all them, they confirmed, and all built around the technology they'd created in Siberia. They laughed heartily when I told them another name I'd heard, "*Impertsy*," Russian slang for "the Imperialists." It was because we grew so large, Alex said. He

thought the people attacking them on internet forums were probably embittered poker professionals who couldn't compete against their bots. They detailed everything, including the police raiding their dorm in Omsk, their evolution into a service business, their sale of liquidity bots and their approach to the poker clubs.

After a couple of hours spent answering my questions, the three Russians asked to be left alone in the vineyard's dining room. I could hear raised voices inside. Then they summoned me back and began an impromptu presentation using a whiteboard from a meeting room, drawing in marker a single line representing their time in poker from about 2004 to the present. Online poker is built on a lie, Alex explained. He called it the "Moneymaker

myth,” saying the Tennessee accountant’s unexpected success had created the misleading impression that anyone with skill and luck could rise to the top.

In truth, they said, online poker was a Darwinian contest. They called it “King of the Hill.” The Siberians were very good at it, helped by their technology. The huge amount of data they’d gathered allowed them to see the game clearly. Alex drew another line on the whiteboard, slanting downward. It represented the average win rate and, by extension, the profit a skilled player could expect to make. Attracted by the steady flow of cash coming in after the Moneymaker boom began, pros and bots had flooded the field, all competing to take chips from the same limited pool of casual, unskilled players. The line suggested it had

become much harder for anyone, even Siberian bot farmers, to make money sustainably.

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Vova showed me a meme depicting what he called the average online table today, with one casual player being eyed hungrily by five pros. “King of the Hill is not a good game,” he said. At first they’d responded by increasing the scale of their operations, initially with partners such as Karpov and then with downloadable software—“selling shovels.” But by around 2018, the group’s founders had reached the same conclusion as the Morgan Stanley analysts would a year later. Even selling liquidity bots couldn’t change the equation. The Russians could see that about 80% of amateur players got sick of losing money and never made it to 1,000 hands. Unless the game got better at attracting and keeping players, they said, it was doomed.

Alex, Valentin and Vova told me they had plans to change this outcome. It was why they'd agreed to meet in Armenia. Their group was working on a model focused on the hobbyists, the 80% who were being driven away. Instead of milking them for chips, the world-beating Omsk poker machine would match players against other people with similar skills. "Like poker Tinder," Vova joked. Pro against pro. Amateur against amateur. A fair contest. A different revenue model that didn't depend on rake. "We need to make a new game," Alex said.

It was an ambitious idea, especially coming from botmakers. Could people reviled as pariahs by the rest of the poker

community really be the ones to save the game?

We spent more time together that weekend, talking about life and poker. At one point we visited an underground monastery gouged into the hills outside Yerevan. Inside, five Armenian women in purple robes stood in a shaft of sunlight singing apostolic hymns, filling the cavern with the haunting sound of another era. The Siberians, eager for lunch, snuck out after a few minutes, but Alex seemed genuinely moved. He closed his eyes, leaning his head back against a stone pillar marked with a cross.

Later, in the vineyard, I put the question to him straight: Could they be both devils and angels? Alex sighed. “We do have good

intentions,” he said. “At the same time, we are in a capitalism game.”

The poker entrepreneurs from Omsk continue to sell their shovels. They show little interest in how the bots are being used or who’s using them. The “brain” they built is no longer only for poker. They said they’ve adapted the software to other challenges, analyzing baseball, cricket, fantasy sports and financial markets, teaching itself to spot patterns beyond human comprehension. There’s even a research and development team in Siberia working on cracking the card game rummy, which has become popular among online gamblers.

As we said goodbye, Alex brought out a black T-shirt—a wry nod to all those who

saw the group as a blight on poker. “The bad Russians” was printed on the front with “bad” crossed out. “GREAT” was scrawled above instead. –*With Jake Rudnitsky and Katia Swarovskaya*

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