

# A Player's Web of Significance: A Narrative of a Finnish Online Poker Semi-Professional

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## Small Money, Large Issue

### A Poker Man's Tale

One night in western Finland in November 2006, Mark (pseudonym), a civil servant and a family man in his mid 30s, was drifting aimlessly through cyberspace when he remembered a conversation he had had with a fellow chess-player earlier that fall. He paused for a minute and then typed a search phrase in Google: "poker room." He clicked on one of the top results and got into a site. He would soon play his first online poker game.

Mark would first bet with play-money and after a few days switch to playing with a few real euros[1]. After learning the game he would invest more and win more – and lose some. His game would improve and his self-control strengthen. Finally, after three and a half years he would count his net winnings for the last year and see that he had won an amount equal to half his salary (ca. € 20 000 or \$ 27 000).

Mark would look back and see how, depending on the day, the game had been a thrilling intellectual challenge, a battle, an irritation or an abomination. He would have visions of going pro and being his own master – or quitting the stupid game once and for all. He would see how the game had brought significant new elements into his life: excitement, money, a new hobby, but also questions of ethics, addiction, time-use, family and reputation. He would deny it, but he had become a poker man.

At this point it should be noted that this is not a typical academic horror story about gambling and addiction. This is different. This is what often happens. To put it in the language of anthropology, this text presents a narrative of an agent in a web of significance or, in other words, a person in a culture. As Clifford Geertz continues the idea of Max Weber, humans are suspended in "webs of significance" they themselves have spun. Culture is those webs and to analyze culture is not, as Geertz says, "an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning." (Geertz 1993, 5.) In this article, the culture in question is online poker and the person spinning a web is my key informant, a semi-professional poker player from western Finland whom I have observed playing and whose interviews have revealed valuable details about the cultural context of the game (See also Jouhki 2010).

I will attempt to reconstruct the way an online poker player negotiates his actions in the online and offline worlds and how he places himself in the hegemonic discourses about poker culture. In other words, this is a story about a poker player as he and I see it. Together we will construct an example of how poker manifests itself in a person's life. In addition to the narrative of the main informant, I will also draw on interviews with members of the informant's family, which, I believe, is an approach too rarely taken in gambling studies. The research question of this article could be formulated concisely as:

### What is The Web of Significance of an Online Poker Player?

To address my question I have combined interviews and observation in a sociocultural environment limited to one household. Thus my research could be called small-scale ethnography, life history or perhaps more accurately

microethnographical, in that it concentrates on a few people's experiences of a culture. (See e.g. Nakane 2007, 101; Streeck & Mehus 2005, 381-382; Ilcan 2002, 40). However, an ethnography (micro or macro) can never be truly confined to the local surroundings, or as Strathern and Steward (2004, 161) say, microethnography intrinsically relates to macroprocesses which are again mediated locally. This means that although my observations are about one household, they do reflect a culture – a web of significance – that spans the globe. The culture is not purely global, nor it is uniquely local, but glocal, as Roudometof (2005, 113) has it.

Glocal is responsible for the transformation of people's everyday lives irrespective of whether they are transnational or not. Glocalization leads to two different versions of cosmopolitanism: first, a thick or rooted or situational cosmopolitanism and, second, a thin cosmopolitanism, whereby detachment allows for transcending the boundaries of one's culture or locale.

For the idea of poker being about small money and large issues, as the title of my introductory chapter suggests, I am indebted to Thomas Hylland Eriksen's idea about anthropology being about small places and large issues (Eriksen 2010). At least this is the case in the story depicted here. In Finland, many money-oriented activities such as investing, stock trading or gambling are often considered morally somewhat dubious, if not outright sinful. Gambling in particular, excluding the nationally approved state-run lottery, is commonly seen as a morally questionable activity no matter if you play it big or small. It seems no player can avoid the large issue it has always been. This is also evident in Mark's refusal to use his own name in my research. To avoid moral judgment, he has told only a few of his friends and none of his colleagues about his gaming. Perhaps this is the first significant finding in this study.

### Reflections about Method

Mark is a childhood friend of mine, and I meet him half a dozen times a year. One of the reasons I started a research project on online poker in the first place was because I knew Mark had played online poker with moderate success and was eager to share his knowledge, successes, losses and his everyday experience with me, perhaps partly because he did not have many people to share them with. I also thought an anthropological "thick description" (Holloway 1997, 160-161; Geertz 1993) in this case might produce an interesting view of a poker player, so often analyzed purely statistically. Thus, for a year or so I jotted down thoughts, quotes, ideas and observations whenever I met with Mark. I bombarded him with questions face-to-face or by SMS and email. I often observed him play. Whenever it seemed proper, I talked about the game with members of his family.

Then in May 2010 I traveled to Mark's hometown for a week and made our first digitally recorded in-depth interview, a two-hour discussion followed by observations and further discussions. I also persuaded Mark's wife, mother and father to be interviewed and I thus expanded the focus to include Mark's immediate family, something perhaps too rarely done in gambling studies. This text is based on the interviews and all the more casual exchanges with Mark and his family.

Evidently, to have a close friend as an informant in a study has important pros and cons. It is not unusual for anthropologists to become close friends with their informants (Sluka 2007, 123; Wagley 2007, 135-136.) or have their friends become their main informants (Powdermaker 1966, 420 in Sluka 2007, 121). For example the famous ethnographer James Spradley is quite careful not to mix and confuse the roles of friend and informant (Spradley 1979, 25-28). Anthropologist Matt Sanderson's questions about having friends as informants reflect the ones that I contemplated before starting my research.

Would I be able to view my friends objectively, as a detached observer? Would I be able to ask tough questions? Would I be free to write what I really felt and observed, or would I self-impose censorship because I didn't want to hurt any feelings? And finally, would my friends (informants) take this project seriously? (Sanderson 2010, 57.)

I, like Sanderson, have contemplated whether I have censored anything too revealing about my informant, but I have come to the fortunate conclusion that I have nothing grave to censor. Moreover, I firmly believe that having a friend-informant has helped me to establish rapport and go outside of the comfort zone with my informant. We discussed many negative aspects of Mark's playing because he trusted me and I assured him that his anonymity would be guaranteed. Also, having a friend doing research about him, I think something similar happened to my informant as happened with Sanderson's research.

I witnessed a transformation in the project. It went from being 'MY' project to 'OUR' project. [...] [R]esearch with friends or previously known associates is possible, and often times the results of such research can be incredibly illuminating [...].

Being among friends brought added pressure not just to write favourably about them, but more importantly, to be objective and accurate. (Sanderson 2010, 60-61)

The disciplines of cultural research approve of sole-informant studies (see e.g. Spradley & McCurdy 1988, 46; Bauman 1986) but sometimes reject them (see e.g. Auger 1999). Within fields like life history research they are part-and-parcel of the day's work (see e.g. Cole & Knowles (eds.) 2001; Amos & Wisniewski (eds.) 1995). I realize the pitfalls of having only one main informant. He might not be a "normal" representative of his "tribe" – a problem anthropologists so often worry about. However, in this case I am not particularly interested in generalizing but in what in anthropology is called controlled, holistic impressionism (see e.g. Barfield 1997, 19; Rapport & Overing 2000, 140; Znamenski 2004, xliv). In my work I interpret this to mean a sample saturated in significance. This is a case that reflects the global web of culture, albeit constructing local cultural and personal peculiarities of the particular microethnographical field. In other words, although I do not claim that my case represents a whole, I do assert that the whole is visible in it. Thus my main informant, Mark, is and at the same time is not a perfect representative of his culture. In the end, this text is about constructing a "dialogical self" (Buitelaar 2006, 261), or what I would like to call a rendering of a personal phenomenology.

Finally, a reader of this text will quickly notice the relatively low investment in theoretical references and discourses. I plead with him or her to allow me to concentrate on the voices of Mark and his family, which I consider to be more important in providing a holistic view of poker playing. Poker allows, invites and even seduces one to enter into some high-flown theoretical discussion (see e.g. Jouhki 2010a & 2011), but this time I have specifically wanted to emphasize the agent, the informant, the subject or the representative of the culture and let him tell us about it himself. The themes of this text have arisen from dialogue with Mark and are a result of the fusion of my academic interest with topics that Mark felt it was important to talk about.

### **Online Poker: A Game and a Culture**

To put it very simply, online poker is a game where people play a form of poker (e.g. Texas Hold'em) against each other at an online card table for money. They try to win the bets laid by other players. One wins according to the way one uses his or her cards to play against others. Thus, in the long run, more skillful players win more than less skillful ones. (Svartsjö et al 2008.). As in this article I am less interested in the game itself than in its significance, I will not describe the rules further. More detailed rules are easily available by Purdy (2005, 1-6), Arnold (2003, 114-127) or at Internet sites such as Poker Rules or Texas Hold'em Poker Rules.

Globally, online poker is one of the games played for money that has grown most rapidly in recent years. Americans might think that it is only played in America. Surely it is at least "a pure expression of the American Dream" (Clee & Clee 1998, 73) and poker has the quintessentially and hegemonically American aura around it (although it does have its root in ancient Persia). However, nowadays it is played all over the world. In Finland until January 2011, poker was allowed only in the designated state-run casinos but not online, which meant that poker-playing Finns had to go to foreign pokersites to play. Now the national gambling law has been revised and the state-run gambling monopoly has launched the first online poker room in Finland.

In 2007, according to a survey by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health of Finland, over 100 000 Finns (2 % of the population) played online poker regularly (MOSAAH 2009) and there is reason to believe that today the actual figure is significantly higher, perhaps even 200,000 due to the increasing popularity of online poker[2]. Still, the number is relatively low, which is to some extent due to the "ascetic agrarian ethos of consumption" intertwined with the traditional puritanical and religious values of Finnish society, where money is the root of all evil and one should not make the pursuit of money the goal of one's activities, at least explicitly. In agrarian Finland, one had to use one's money with prudence; the best thing was not to spend it at all, but to save it. (Autio & Autio 2009, 228-229; Autio, Huttunen & Puhakka 2010, 95).

According to a Finnish gambling researcher, Olli Alho (1981; see also Matilainen 2009), the Finnish (Protestant) work ethic demands that wealth should be based on "proper work" and suitable economic activity. The winnings of gambling are "strange money" and at odds with an ethos in which progress in life is based on "honest" work and diligence. Alho refers to Manfred Zollinger, who compares Catholic and Protestant fears about gambling: while Catholics fear what happens if they lose, Protestants fear what happens if they win. In addition, in Finland as in many other countries, people have thought that money games are associated with drinking and prostitutes. Perhaps one more example will clarify the traditional Finnish attitude towards gambling. In the 1960s a Finnish folklore scholar, Juha Pentikäinen, studied 45 samples of folklore about how people broke the Sabbath or disrupted a holy

day in the province of Northern Savo in central Finland. He found that out of the 45 stories he examined, 44 were about gambling. The one remaining story was about dancing on a Sunday. (Piišpanen 2009, 183-184.) However, as Matilainen (2009) says, recent developments in gambling have in a way started to domesticate gambling, to make it socially more acceptable.

As a sociocultural phenomenon online poker can be approached in a plethora of ways. It is a game, a form of gambling and a manifestation of the wider cultural phenomenon of online gaming, economics and even globalization. Despite the different possible views, general attitudes towards poker manifest in an entrenched battle between one side that calls it a creative or at least harmless hobby and the other that calls it a harmful addiction. Academia has been more interested in the latter. (See e.g. Svartsjö et al 2008, 13; Schwartz 2007, 447-494.)

The common image of poker culture is of big players moving big money to live in luxury or small players getting a little excitement to escape the everyday. The new and old poker media reproduce a fascinating folklore with hero stories, foxes and hens, sex appeal and battle. Abolitionists attempt to control the recklessness of cyberspace. To them poker-players are ruining their lives by not obeying the traditional dichotomy of work and play. (Jouhki 2010.) Evidently, poker as a cultural phenomenon attracts strong views and emotions. This is also soon shown in the narratives of Mark and his family.

No doubt poker culture – or its mythology – emphasizes huge, fast wins and tries to lure those hesitating on the edge to take the plunge and join the culture, but at the same time it perpetuates the ideology of professional poker being about plodding. Poker heroes might be incredibly rich but it's not about luck. It's hard work, comparable to Christian piety – with a hint of blessing. (Jouhki 2010.) This is the imagery of the poker media. It's the hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994, 12; Perry 1998, 1) of poker. However, my goal here is to describe the “lesser reality”, the reality which is everyday in poker, by focusing on a representative of the culture, for whom the occasional can of beer replaces the case of champagne in celebrations and a DVD-player is what one purchases with one's big pot rather than a sports car. No families are broken up and no jobs are lost in this story, so it might seem pointless to the majority of scholars who are interested in problem-based research into gambling. Personally, I feel that the down-to-earth attitude brought out in Mark's narrative is a refreshing contribution to gambling studies.

## Player Defining Game, Game Defining Player

### The Beginning

For Mark, chess was the king of games and although he had sometimes played poker with his friends he did not think it was a challenging enough game for him. But when a friend of his spoke about the excitement of studying different aspects of poker – a feeling comparable to learning chess – Mark got interested. The problem was that, as a family man, Mark did not have much time for a new hobby. He was also a bit worried about the fast road from playing a small-time game to investing large sums of money. The friend assured him that he played only with bets that could be counted in cents, not euros. Mark had also heard about other chess players winning a lot of money at poker and he had even seen one arriving at a chess tournament in a fancy sports car. He had heard of some young chess players suspending their studies to play poker online. Mark knew that a chess player had qualities that were useful when playing poker.

When he first tried poker out with play-money it felt pretty exciting. Even his wife Helen (pseudonym) wanted to see him play and tried the game herself. Then Mark popped the question to Helen: “How about if I try this with real money?” “Sure,” Helen said “as long as it's a small sum.” Mark agreed. He only wanted to see if he could win real money, even if just a tiny sum. Mark transferred thirty euros to a gaming account in an international poker website and started to play in the smallest possible tables. He did not play no limit but only fixed limit with a definite maximum raise. On the day he played his first game of poker online, he purchased his first poker manual to minimize the significance of luck in his game.

At first Mark had no visions of getting rich by playing poker. He was just enthusiastic about trying the game. He remembers saying to a friend: “If I can win just the amount of money that a case of beer costs, then, when I have the beer in front of me, I can say I've got that more or less for free.” When Mark started to play, he played every day. In a few days he saw his initial thirty euros grow to a hundred, which felt like a huge amount of money. He thought he should withdraw his winnings but because he did not know how to do so, he ended up continuing the game. Soon he had lost his hundred because he tried on bigger tables and playing no limit.

At that point Mark thought that he would not transfer any more money to his gaming account. To do so would have been gambling (“uhkapeli” in Finnish, literally meaning “game of threat”). However, he had noticed that many poker sites arranged so-called free roll tournaments that have real prizes up to a thousand euros but no cost to the player. He took part in one and won some gaming money. He noticed too that playing on a small cash account was difficult and insecure because of the oscillation of wins and losses.

A few months later Mark came across a site offering 50 dollars to all who registered as new players. He was excited: “It can’t be true – a fifty for everyone! How can this be!” Now he had what he thought was a lot of money to play with, and he played it aggressively. Mark remembers telling his wife: “Look how easy this is when it’s not your own money! Just raise huge amounts and they will fold!” Mark managed to increase his cash to a few hundred in a few days.

When his account rose to about three hundred, for the first time Mark experienced a phenomenon that has since occurred to him at least fifty times. He went into “a tilt”. After suffering numerous highly unlikely losses in a row with big pots he lost control and thought, according to his own words,

Hey, wait a minute. How is this possible! Soon I’ll have lost all my winnings. I must get into a bigger table. I’m sure I can do it if I play carefully. I’ll just put more money on the table. I want my winnings back.

And, as usually happens, even though one plays very carefully someone will have a better hand. “I lost everything. I got depressed.” Mark said. Mark made a “rookie mistake” and instead of going into smaller tables he went to play in bigger ones to try to make up his losses. However, by the end of 2007, after playing for a year, experimenting, playing free rolls and breaking his resolution not to transfer money to play more, he was left with winnings of 500 euros. For that he had had to read, practice and play “really a lot”. At that time he did not think of poker as a significant source of income. It was just something he did for fun and a little money.

Mark’s second year of poker saw a steady increase in skill and winnings but it was in his third year that his winnings could be calculated in thousands. Finally, the net profit of his last year stood at around 11,000 euros, not including his gaming account, which usually hovers at something above a thousand. The game has become a significant source of income, Mark says. For example, the family could not plan a holiday abroad prior to playing, but now it is possible.

### **Emotional Money**

Poker society might often downplay the role of money and portray the game as an exciting venture into strategy. However, to Mark poker is first about money, then about the game. “If there weren’t any money in the game, my playing would stop immediately.” When I wondered whether this is a common attitude to poker, Mark replied

People can test their motivation by asking themselves whether they would play anymore if money were taken out of it. If one says yes, then they are interested in the game per se. If one says no, then it’s about the money.

Then again, one can ask the same question about an interesting job and end up deducing it is more about money, Mark thought. However, poker is a hobby, not a job, he added. One rarely has hobbies where money is such an essential element. “One doesn’t go riding or jogging or play chess for money.” Mark added that he had actually played chess for money during his college years “but I’ve never thought chess is a boring game without money.”

Although money is the reason Mark plays, he does find many interesting elements in the game. For example, Mark has not played Rush Poker anymore although it is a speeded-up version of online poker and a quicker way to make money. The reason is that he likes to use his skills in analyzing his opponents’ tactics, and this is only possible in slower cash games. It makes the game more interesting. Also, in Rush Poker one cannot take advantage of an opponent “going into a tilt” – another element Mark is interested in.

When I asked Mark about how his attitude to the game has changed over the years, he said the range of emotions between times of winning and losing has widened.

The differences are pretty astounding. I’m a bit troubled about how the game can affect my emotional state so much. Sometimes, when I’ve won a lot and feel happy about it, I may get anxious when I start thinking, like, is this the only reason I’m happy. [...] Is this what it takes, that I win big time, to be in a good mood? Then, when you lose a thousand in an hour, you become apathetic and depressed. You don’t want to talk but just stare at the TV apathetically and think how stupid you are. It’s a huge difference in emotional states.

After hearing Mark say this, I wondered what Mark meant by feeling stupid when he lost. Stupid about having

played so poorly?

Maybe, when I say ‘damn I’m so stupid’ it means ‘damn I’m so stupid to play the game’. I feel it is totally stupid to even play the game, there’s no sense in it. Then I think I’ll stop playing altogether, concentrate on the family and kids and do all kinds of fun things. At that moment the game feels like a waste of time, like my life is going to waste. These kinds of thoughts... [laughs]. But then, when everything’s going upward... Then you think maybe I should quit my day job and go pro. You know, ‘This is so much fun!’ You could plan all the schedules and wouldn’t care about the clock. That’s how wide the emotional scale is.

When I asked Mark whether he thought he could really “go pro”, he said that he often feels he could. The biggest problem is his excessive trust in his skills. One should learn to restrain and control one’s game more.

I’ve had these terrible situations because of going into tilt. Then you forget everything you’ve learned and put a thousand dollars on a table filled with rock-hard professionals, go all-in and think ‘I’m going to win now!’ When this happens dozens of times, it becomes stressful. You feel stupid because of not quitting with a thousand dollars when it was still possible. Also, the same thousand dollars have a totally different history and significance depending on whether one has earned it by fighting one’s way up from zero or when one has dropped quickly down to a thousand. Coming down feels like nothing but earning a thousand you can feel like you’re on top of the world.

Mark says online poker is an uhkapeli if one invests so much that losing it would make one’s life difficult. All in all Mark is not worried about playing the game. Sure, the scale of emotions is very wide but he has not yet felt that things are really getting out of hand. He predicts that he will continue to be successful in the future if he continues to exercise self-restraint and self-control. The biggest obstacle to success is a lack of self-discipline in a tight situation.

Everybody can win but what you do when you lose a lot... in that particular moment when you have lost a lot and think about your next move. Do you have the sense to turn off the machine and go to bed or do you stop being sensible and go all-in?

Perhaps this moment is one of the most crucial ones, a frontier that determines whether one is addicted or not. For Mark, the frontier is very rarely, if ever, crossed, although he has crossed it many times in the past. Nowadays, the amount of his time affected by poker is strictly limited. For example, despite the intensity of the gaming environment and the emotions it produces, Mark says he rarely thinks about poker when he is out of the house or working. However, he might occasionally remember a tournament and plan to play in the evening, or when he is buying something he might think that it’s possible because of winning at poker. As far as addiction is concerned, this appears to be rather a mild case.

Mark preferred tournaments over cash games because in tournaments everybody starts off on equal terms. Sometimes a tournament just goes sour on him right from the start but often the beginning is so sweet that he feels he knows everything will go just great. In general, he has noticed that it is worse to play on weekends than weekdays because then he usually has a few glasses of wine or a few beers. Sometimes one or two drinks too many can have an effect on the tournament. One gets too self-confident, Mark explained.

I observed Mark play one of those tournaments. We had had a few beers beforehand, which made him bolder and eager to bluff. He dropped out of the tournament after forty-five minutes. Fortunately he lost only 26 dollars, the ticket price for the tournament. Moreover, a small loss like that is often followed by a bigger win. A few days after the tournament I met with Mark and he told me he had played heads-up the following day. He played a guy for twenty minutes and won three hundred. ”The guy tilted a bit. It would have been easy to keep milking him but recently I’ve started to think less is enough, so I stopped.”

Mark told me that recently he has reduced his playing time. If he plays a lot it feels like nothing is enough. ”The playing feeds itself and then you want to play even more. Then you can play for even five or six hours a night.” Nowadays Mark estimates that he plays about twenty to twenty-five hours a week, which is considerably less than it used to be at its height. Mark admits that he rarely takes a day off from poker, although he thinks he should: it would benefit him mentally and financially. He thinks that daily sessions should not be too long, either, but “in the heat of the game one doesn’t want to remember that.” When one has played for five hours and won nothing one feels that one has wasted one’s time completely and so wants to play more.

Whether this can be called addictive behavior is difficult to say and a matter of choosing a narrative. It seems that poker or computer games in general are activities that attract addiction discourse. In many other contexts being relentless in reaching a goal does not mean addiction but persistence. To Mark, it seems, his behavior is situated

on the borderline between “addiction” and “healthy gaming” but in the end he seems to feel he is on the sunnier side most of the time. Despite sometimes having to fight off the urge to play more, he usually manages to keep his gaming in check and to feel happy about it.

Although advertisements for poker depict poker as a battle, Mark does not feel he is really battling against anyone except himself. For example, when he is playing a tournament and has lost almost all his chips, he might consider betting all-in and quitting, but then he gets into battle mode and decides to restrain himself, play sharp and tenaciously, and fight his way to the top. However, playing heads-up (man-to-man) poker is “real swordplay”: one has to be innovative and aggressive. In heads-up one has to “bet and bet and show signs of aggressiveness even though one has nothing in one’s hand.”

### **Moral Web**

Mark sometimes thinks he is a part of a system that produces a lot of problems for a lot of people. The new tires for his family car are bought with money that has been taken away from someone else. However, usually he ends up rationalizing that no one is forced to play the game. And when he is playing the game, he does not try to imagine what kind of people he is playing against. Whether they are filthy rich capitalists, desperately poor working people or “regular people” like him, is all the same at the table. He just tries to profile them as players, whether they play boldly or carefully, and he adjusts his game accordingly.

If Mark thought poker was morally wrong he would want to quit, but he knows the poker world and thinks players are not involved in anything immoral. If people knew more about the game, the moral image of the game would improve. Mark understands very well, though, that the whole money-gaming phenomenon per se might be morally dubious to many people, and all the sad stories might make them condemn the whole game.

Mark’s decision to keep quiet about his poker playing is due not only to poker having a morally ambiguous image in Finland but also somehow to its being to do with winning money. Once, a neighbor asked him whether he had bought his new car with poker money. Surprisingly, Mark felt ashamed about his money. Just as he does not want to make public any information about his income in general, so he does not want people to know about his winnings. It is embarrassing. For this reason poker rarely leaves the house. Mark has even gotten some promotional T-shirts from poker sites but he is too embarrassed to wear them outside the house.

I asked Mark if he has read a lot of stories about people who have lost everything in poker. Yes, Mark answered, but these stories are about “ordinary people,” not professionals, as they do not make that kind of mistake. The big losers are the kind of people who start playing poker and want to go straight to the top, “where the luxury is” according to the ads. According to Mark they are lured by false hopes of winning big money.

I knew that Mark was not a particularly religious person but that he was spiritual to say the least, so I asked him if he had any kind of numinous view of his luck or success. He thought about it for a while and said the first thing that came to mind was that if he were to go see a priest and make confession, the first thing he would confess would be his poker-playing. Also, sometimes when he drops out of a tournament or is on a losing streak in a cash game, he has thought it might be some kind of Karmic force telling him he should stop for the day because he has an early morning the next day. Or if he is losing and his children interrupt him, he might think that is “meant to be”, and he should spend some time with them. However, he wonders if that is just his way of easing his guilt about losing money. But when Mark wins, he never thinks it is his fate or that he has somehow Karmically earned his wins. Interestingly, his earlier thoughts make it clear that he is even a bit ashamed, not proud, when he wins.

Finally I asked the most common question in gambling research, about addiction. “Sure, addiction develops” Mark said. “Sometimes you just feel like playing.” At that point Mark’s wife Helen joined in and remarked: “Sometimes he comes and sits on the sofa for ten minutes, feeling all antsy, and then returns to the computer.” Mark admits that the urge to play is annoying at times. When their Internet was down for a week, “it was a good week.” “It was exciting to think what other things there are to do instead of playing.” Mark thinks that if he has an addiction, it might be called a positive one. Although it is evident that

[t]he more you play, the more you want to play. Short sessions won’t hook you that much. [...] If poker were a full-time job, it would impoverish my life too much. It is a good addition to work, although sometimes I wonder if I could make a living from this. Then sometimes I feel repulsed by how disgusting the game is.

### **Poker Man in a Poker Culture?**

Mark does not feel that the poker community is important to him, nor does he feel that poker is any part of his

identity. This is mostly because he wants to keep quiet about his involvement in the game. When he plays alone, he does not feel that he is part of a community. However, some discussion forums have perhaps become familiar places for him to visit and he is interested in champion-level games and how successful Finns are globally. He also often reads poker news and some poker magazines. The significance of a few poker-playing friends is high.

He has one particular friend with whom he spends time playing. They might get together and play on separate laptops, passing time together in that way. This friend learned poker through Mark, and he is glad to have been of help to him. Often they chat while playing online and might for example discuss different hands. Mark is keen to emphasize that he never cooperates with his friends if they play at the same table - it would be against the rules and wrong.

When I asked Mark about gender issues in poker, for example how advertizing tries to construct an image of poker being a highly aggressive, masculine game, he said he is not really interested in that kind of imagery. Online it does not really matter what gender you are. "The ads leave me cold, anyway; I'm only interested in their numbers." The ads are aimed at impressing rookies or people hesitating about trying the game.

Mark also does not care about the celebrity endorsement of poker. "They haven't impressed me with their skills." He is simply a player who wants to win a little and provide for his family. Anything else is unimportant, apart from keeping up with any major news. He also does not want to endorse poker as a hobby, "perhaps because after all I think poker is a slightly dubious game morally." This, perhaps, is a significant cultural difference between Finnish and, for example, American values. In Finland people often feel guilty about their wealth, at least publicly.

On the other hand, when I insisted on talking about the advertisements in poker magazines, Mark said that they do say something about the luxury that lies at the heart of poker culture. Good players live in luxury. The aggressiveness presented in the ads does not appeal to him, but he admits it is a part of the game. But if the ad has no relevant information, or "even if the ad shows a scantily dressed woman I turn the page." When there is relevant information and it is lucrative enough, he might switch to another poker site and take advantage of their offer. A good rake back and other bonuses usually add up to several hundred euros to add to his monthly income, so it is important to take up any bargains.

Mark does not see himself as a typical representative of poker culture. Perhaps he is a positive example of how a family man with a day job can fit poker into his life. That said, Mark comments that he is lucky to have started a family and gotten a job before starting to play poker. If he were single, he would surely play a lot more. I asked if the world of poker would be a better place if everyone was like him. "Yes," was his brief reply, after a moment's thought.

Las Vegas, according to poker folklore, is the Mecca of gambling, but Mark is not interested in the city. "Actually, I'd rather avoid the place." He is not a live poker player but when I ask Mark if he would like to try live poker, to my surprise he mentions several times how much he respects live poker players. They have to

have an eye for the tells and when you have to physically put your chips in the middle [makes a hauling gesture]... it's harder than online poker. Also they talk a lot and shoot the breeze. It just feels more difficult.

After some thought Mark admitted he would like to try live poker some time, for example in a casino in Helsinki. At that point Helen joined the conversation and suggested he went to the casino when they next went to Helsinki. In the end, Mark concluded, he still preferred online to offline poker. "It's easier for a family man to be present, at least physically [laughs]." To this Helen replied jokingly: "I do shake him awake if needed." Mark used to play online chess for the same reason, because he had kids and a family. Actually, he recalls, he used to play online chess a lot more than he plays poker." But [rating points] and success in chess are not so useful for the family. You can't buy tires for the car with them."

## **| Gambling with(in) the Family**

### **Enjoying his Wife's Support, Saving Time for his Kids**

Mark usually plays in the bedroom, because that is the quietest place. However, he also plays in the living room quite often despite – or actually because of – his children and wife being there. That way he is with them "even if only physically". It is a bit tricky to be sociable when playing. He remarks that his son often comes to ask him something just when he is deeply involved in something and calculating whether or not to bet a few hundred euros.



Mark's wife Helen also remembers an occasion when she asked him a question and for a moment Mark was dead silent, but then he abruptly broke into a loud cheer. Helen was startled but she immediately realized that Mark had won a large sum of money.

Sometimes Mark plays even in the bathroom or takes his laptop to the dinner table. This happens when a tournament is going on and he cannot leave the poker table for even a moment. Sometimes Helen helps him and folds for him when he has to leave the table for a while.

Mark tries to play when he is alone in the house or when the rest of the family has something to do that does not require him to be around. Mark often plays too late and is tired in the morning, and even if he has not actually played late he might not be able to fall asleep quickly because he is "still turned on and thinking about the game."

Mark is fortunate to have a wife who feels moderately positive about his game. They have agreed on some points concerning the use of money and time and Helen respects the work Mark puts in to provide for the family. When I told Mark that I would assume that many wives would think differently, Mark told me about a dream Helen had had about him. In it Mark had lost five thousand euros in a poker game. He had gone to tell Helen about it, totally depressed, but Helen had been very calm about it and had said: "Oh well, what can you do." To Mark the dream was reassuring.

Sometimes their (elementary school age) children, especially their son might come to Mark and demand attention and ask why dad is playing so much. Once Mark told him he was in the middle of a competition and he might win enough money to buy his son two mopeds. To get a moped was the son's big dream, so he urged Mark to continue. This was one of the rare occasions when Mark told his children about money being involved in the game. Mark thinks they probably know it anyway but are too tactful to talk about it. Mark said that despite playing poker, he still spends a lot of time with his children. He does not deny that they often want more attention, but in the same way that kids might question why dad is reading the newspaper or doing this or that, they question him playing poker. "When they want you to spend time with them they don't care what you're doing."

Mark says that his parents know about his gaming and have some sense of the amount of income the game generates for Mark. He does not discuss the game much with them, but if he does so at all it is more with his father than with his mother, because he and his father have a shared history of playing chess and his father is more interested in games in general. Mark guesses that in the beginning his mother was more worried that he might lose too much money in the game. Now he has been able to convince his parents that the amounts he invests are not bigger than he is prepared to lose. He has even shown them all his poker books and explained that poker is not merely a game of luck.

Helen also rarely asks Mark about the game, but when I talked to her she told me she can tell whenever Mark's gaming session has not gone very well. "Mark won't talk much at those times." However, Mark is often eager to explain to her some interesting situations, "eyes ablaze". When I asked Helen about Mark spending time away from the family, she replied "I'm the one sitting in front of the TV and doing nothing productive. I should do something else." All in all, Helen is quick to admit that Mark's gaming has benefited the family. Perhaps it helps that she has never been taught to feel negative about gambling, unlike most other Finns. She has a lot of memories from her childhood of men gambling, tossing coins and so on, and it seemed like a normal thing to do. "Nothing sinful about it."

If people knew more about poker, Helen said, they would be a lot more tolerant of the game. The only thing Helen is worried about is the remote chance that the tax office will want to take a cut of Mark's winnings. In Finland, poker winnings that come from outside the European Free Trade Area (EFTA) area are taxable income, but Mark neither knows nor cares how much of his winnings come from inside or outside of EFTA.

### **Parental Advisory**

I managed to persuade Mark's parents, Benny and Maria (pseudonyms), both pensioners, to be interviewed about Mark's gaming. Although they talked openly about the game and their son, it was often difficult for me to make out whether they were talking about Mark as a poker player or, in general, about poker as a game. First of all his parents got into a long discussion about the definition of gambling, the "game of threat". Benny started:

I think all games like lottery, pajatso [a traditional Finnish coin game] and so on are uhkapeli in that if your bet rises to be too much for your financial situation to bear, then it's uhkapeli. The word uhka [threat] in the word uhkapeli means that it threatens your life. You lose food and everything.

Maria wanted to stress the element of addiction but Benny questioned how adequate it was to define gambling

simply as an addiction. Maria explained: “When you’re addicted you don’t think about what you put into the game, the excitement is too great.” The parents also liked to think of poker as a profession.

[Maria:] A poker professional... He does nothing but play poker...? What do you think Benny?

[Benny:] A tough question.... A profession means work. A game is never work. It’s a game... On the other hand there are professional hockey-players. And they work, a lot even. But a hockey player never puts his own money into the game. Poker is poker. It’s a game because you pay the fee.

[Maria:] A hockey player makes a contract. Maybe a poker player is like a private entrepreneur?

[JJ:] So if a person does nothing else for a living but plays poker, it can’t be called work?

[Benny & Maria:] No.

[Benny:] No. It’s a game. If not [a game of threat] then... a game of poker.

Then the discussion seemed to turn from defining poker to assessing the value of poker as a profession. Maria did not want to call poker a profession although she had heard about Finnish poker professionals in the USA.

[Maria:] I don’t think it could be thought of as... I don’t think one should get a profession like that... Sure, it becomes a profession! But the profession might last just as long as the coins in your pocket. It might end real short. [...] Mark plays on a reasonable level. He is not a risk-taker but plays as much as he can afford to lose... [...] Mark has a clear budget and a limit to stick to, so we don’t have to worry.

[Benny:] ...only the addiction side is...

[Maria continues:] ...it surely develops... In online poker it’s a great danger.

[Benny:] ...It’s so easy to play online. You don’t have to go out; the wife doesn’t have to know about you playing the cards.

[Maria interrupts]: Why would you have to hide it from your wife if you have no problem?

Finally Benny concluded their definition of gambling:

[Benny:] All money games are gambling if they exceed my economic resources. Then I’m threatening my own life and financial position by taking a risk. Then it turns into gambling. That’s how easy it is to define!

[Maria almost whispering:] ...Maybe it’s not that easy...

When I wanted to talk more about the parents’ worries about Mark, Maria said she had none, really.

[Benny:] ...but are you worried about the addiction, about him playing every day? Is it a benefit or a burden to the family even if you win a thousand a month?

[Maria:] ...maybe it’s a benefit... I don’t think Mark... I wonder if it’s about thousands... more like hundreds... He wouldn’t risk that much... The small sums he makes are just extra income. Sure it might develop into an addiction but if it doesn’t bother their family life. If it’s together... his wife approves and the family approves of dad always playing joker [sic], then it’s not a... to get a little pocket money... then it’s no big deal.

Benny recalled how his own mother saw a pack of cards per se as sinful and advised Benny against playing cards. Maria added that nowadays people “have progressed from that. [...] It’s not a sin, it’s lawful.” It is a legitimate hobby and “it’s not classified in a way that would dishonor it.”

Benny’s memories got the parents remembering stories about people playing cards when they were drunk and losing fortunes. Maria said: “There’s the danger! Playing at home is easy. And if you’re drunk you go all daredevil. That’s when you might suffer losses. It’s too easy to play at home.” Benny added that no game should be played while drunk. Maria continued: “...and money games are more attractive and so run the risk of addiction...” “...And losing a fortune,” Benny concluded.

At one point Maria remarked that in fact she did not know enough about poker to understand it and that perhaps that was why she thought of it as “a game of threat”. Both of them had seen poker only on TV and at least to Maria it looked “pretty suspicious” with “all these hats and sunglasses on...” All in all, Mark’s parents seemed to think poker in general could be a slippery slope or at least a narrow path that only a wise person could tread without problems. In the particular case of their son, even if Benny and Maria were a little bit worried about Mark – which was evident only between the lines – they trusted his judgment. Moreover, because they trusted their son to be a good father and husband and a hard-working civil servant as well as a careful poker player, they seemed to be slightly worried that his everyday life would be tiresome. But their worries, just as parents’ worries usually are, were not based on observation; it was only this possibility that made them unable to rest easy about the game.

## Epilogue: It's Not Just a Game

According to the leading scholar in gambling studies, Per Binde, Johan Huizinga, the father of *Homo Ludens* (1939) and a grand theorist of gaming, was against gambling. To Huizinga, gambling games were unproductive, developed nothing cultural and gave nothing to life and the mind. To Huizinga, gambling was “false play”. (Binde 2009, 44.) According to my experience, Huizinga’s analysis was a product of his taste rather than his scholarly observation. Per Binde’s review of social science research on the subject quickly shows how immense the sociocultural value of gambling is. He talks about the religious and existential aspects of gambling (ibid., 47) as well as the social rewards that a gambling community produces for its members. It is a different “world” where, according to Binde, other identities are assumed and specific and complex cultural codes are followed (ibid., 18). The amount of ethnographic studies (ibid., 51) on gambling has already produced enough information on the subject to enable us to conclude that it is a significant element in any society.

However, to me it seems that often scholars’ enthusiasm comes close to creating a hyperreality of the object of study. No doubt social identity can indeed be seen as a significant factor in gambling (ibid., 19), and social frustration and escapism do drive people to put their money into the great promise of a poker table (ibid., 8-24). Also, one can easily form a theory about poker being a model example of postmodern creativity and consumption (Jouhki 2011; Kingma 1996, 219 in Binde, 2009, 469). I certainly believe that these configurations make a lot of sense and are important in creating a varied, analytical picture of gambling. However, by presenting Mark’s story, I hope I have managed to introduce a more mundane and mainstream aspect of gambling. One does not have to be a home-wrecking gambling junkie to play poker, even if one plays it regularly. Nor does one necessarily ride a wave of fragmented, neo-nomadic hyperreal smorgasbord-identity when clicking the mouse to play. Mark, like, I suppose, a majority of poker players, plays not because he is postmodernist or a gaming junky but just because he wants to earn a bit more money.

However, it seems that there is no escape from the “large issue” of poker, the potential stigmatization that derives from its ambivalent morality, at least in the Protestant, Nordic part of the world. This is evident in the case of Mark, who does not feel comfortable about his double role as a civil servant in a respectable position and a poker player earning money in the symbolic shadows of the online poker world. How burdensome such moral conflict is I have not yet gone deep enough with Mark to find out, but I can get a hint of his worries through some introspection of my own. I too have had doubts about poker, not about the game itself but as a respectable object of research. It is interesting how the morality of the game spreads even to the level of analysis, where scholars might feel that they are gambling with their careers and are perhaps too scared to go “all in” in investing this field of research.

If a researcher into poker feels this shy about poker, no wonder a player might feel the same. It often seems like the academic view of gambling has only two alternatives: either it is an addiction or “false play” and has to be tamed or eradicated, or then it is a new way of blurring the boundaries between work and play and of creating new identities. Again, I agree that both views are immensely important and interesting, but I wish less attractive and less dramatic views could get more academic space. A poker player can be a family man quietly winning (or earning) some money to buy things for his family. That online poker has been researched so much as a problem has influenced the way the media, the public and the players in Finland view the game. However, the majority of those over 100,000 Finnish men (97%) and women (99%) who play online poker report that they have no gambling problem at all (Järvinen-Tassopoulos 2009: 19). Moreover, it hardly implies a pandemic addiction problem that Peluuri, the Finnish problem gambling helpline, received only 86 calls concerning online poker in 2008 (ibid.: 53).

In this light, it seems addiction is perceived to be a significant problem in online poker because the hegemonic discourse demands it. The Finnish state, for example, wants to protect its gambling monopoly in the EU and to do this it needs to emphasize gambling-related problems (Tammii 2008). But there is an increasing body of literature and articles in the media that valorize the more mainstream practice of poker.

Gambling has many diverse forms and can be viewed through various ethical stands “ranging from the harshest denunciation to great appreciation” (Binde 2005, 446). To some, gambling is theft (ibid. 2005, 451) and for many it is consumption of leisure (ibid. 2009, 56.). The global – and Finnish – trend is to become more liberal. The mainstream gambler, such as Mark, is someone who, by his own choice, has entered a game that has explicit rules and thus creates a space for social interaction, leisure, suspense and potential additional income or an agreeable loss of it (Ibid. 2005, 450). The rules are easy: win or lose, but it is the social and cultural baggage that provides the gambler with the final verdict: guilty or not guilty.

## Endnotes

1. During the past six years the value of one euro has varied between roughly 1,2 and 1,6 American dollars.
2. For example in the US in 2005 16 percent of men and 10 percent of women played poker (online or offline). The statistics were produced by Ladbrokes and presented in Judy Xanthopoulos's report (p. 6) for the Poker Players Alliance.

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