

**Moderate Expectations:
The Case of a Normal, Level-Headed Semi-Professional Online Poker Player
and His Family**

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Abstract

To Johan Huizinga, the father of Homo Ludens and a grand theorist of gaming, gambling games are unproductive, develop nothing cultural and give nothing to life and the mind. In the same vein, it seems, gambling research has two choices. It sees gambling either as an addiction, “false play” that has to be tamed or eradicated, or then as a new way of blurring the boundaries between work and play and of creating new identities in the postmodern world. This paper is about neither of these. Rather, through one example it suggests that online poker, work and family can mix very well, but researchers do not talk about it. Often Internet poker offers a great opportunity for extra income, intellectual challenge and/or light entertainment without addiction or economic harm.

Keywords: Online poker, microethnography, experience, gambling, a case stud

STUDYING A POKER PLAYER

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. In the long run, more skillful players win more than less skillful ones. (Svartsjö et al., 2008; for more detailed rules, see Purdy, 2005, pp. 1-6.)

Online poker can be approached from many different research angles. It is either work or play, addiction or entertainment, micro or macro economics, a game of chance or a mathematical venture. It is a manifestation of postmodern culture in a digital world or a universal and primordial need to take exciting risks. Despite the different possible views, general attitudes towards poker could be seen as resembling two sides in a battle, one that calls it a harmless hobby and the other that calls it a harmful addiction. Academia has tended to support the latter. (See e.g. Svartsjö et al., 2008, p. 13; Schwartz 2007, pp. 447-494.)

New and old poker media construct a fascinating folklore with stories of heroes, foxes and hen, sex appeal and battle. Poker-centered moral panic, on the other hand, strives to control the recklessness of cyberspace. To those who object to poker, poker is a game of chance and its players run the risk of ruining their lives. (Jouhki, 2010a.) However interesting these extreme views may be, my goal here is to describe the “boring reality”, the everyday of poker, where income is modest, families are not broken up and jobs not lost. This paper is not the typical academic horror story about gambling and addiction. This is what *often* happens.

This study is microethnographical in the sense that it focuses on a narrative of a single agent or person in a culture (see e.g. Atkinson et al, 2007, p. 191). The culture in question is online poker and the person is Mark (a pseudonym), my key informant and a poker player from western Finland¹. Through my observations and interviews (during 2009-2010) with Mark I attempt to show how online poker culture manifests and reverberates itself in a player's life and how the player situates himself in the culture. The research question of this paper could be formulated concisely as:

How does a semi-professional online poker player experience his poker playing? How does one grow as a player, learn from one's mistakes, negotiate, control, and manage gaming within one's social surroundings (i.e. work and family)?

Online poker can be approached through statistical methods or theoretical discussions but in this paper I want to emphasize the actor or the representative of the culture and let him talk about it himself. The themes discussed arose from dialogue with the informant and are a result of the fusion of my academic interest with topics that he felt it was important to talk about. This text is about constructing an image not of a whole culture but of a "dialogical self" (Buitelaar 2006, p. 261), or what I would like to call a rendering of a personal phenomenology.

Obviously, although studies focusing on an individual as a representative of a culture are widely practiced and present interesting cases (e.g. Streeck & Mehus, 2005, pp. 381-382; Spradley & McCurdy, 1988), they cannot be generalized to present whole cultures. While acknowledging this I still want to suggest that the case I present is a rather typical story of a poker player, with the gaming producing positive social, psychological, economic, and entertainment value to the player.

MARK'S STORY

Getting into the Game

For Mark, chess — not poker — 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. When he first tried poker out with play-money it felt pretty exciting. Even his wife Helen (a 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 started to play at the smallest possible tables and at the same time began to read books about poker strategy. He was not interested in trying his *luck* but wanted to improve his *skills* in poker. At first Mark had no visions of getting rich. 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. However, he lost his hundred soon 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 *uhkapeli* (gambling, lit. “game of threat” in Finnish). However, he had noticed that many poker sites arranged *free roll* tournaments with awards of up to a thousand euros. 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 USD to all who registered as new players. He was excited about the free money and played 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!*” 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, as he himself put it,

How is this possible! I'll have lost all my winnings soon. I must get onto 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. Mark had made a "rookie mistake" and instead of going onto *smaller* tables he went to play on bigger ones to try to make up for his losses. Nevertheless, by the end of 2007, after playing carefully 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 for fun and a little money.

In his third year Mark's winnings could be calculated in thousands. The net profit from the previous twelve months' gaming stood at around 11,000 euros, not including his gaming account, which usually hovers at something above a thousand. The game had become a significant source of extra income.

Emotional Money

To Mark poker is first about money, then about the game.

People can test their motivation by asking themselves whether they would play anymore if the 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.

Mark acknowledges that there are few hobbies where money is such an essential element. Although money is the main reason Mark plays, he does find many interesting elements in the game. For example, he likes to use his skills in analyzing his opponents' tactics. When I asked Mark about how his attitude to the game had changed over the years, he said the range of emotions between times of winning and losing had widened.

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. [...] 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. [...] 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!'

The biggest problem with poker, Mark thinks, is one's excessive trust in one's own skills. One should learn to restrain and control one's game more, something he himself has learned the hard way.

I've had these terrible situations because of going into a 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 winning a thousand you can feel like you're on top of the world.

Mark says online poker is an *uhkapeli* ("game of threat") 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. The scale of emotions is

wide, it is true, but he has not yet felt that things are getting out of hand. He predicts that he will continue to be successful in the future if he continues to exercise restraint and self control. The biggest obstacle to success is a lack of self-discipline in a tight situation.

Anybody can win but what you do when you lose a lot.... at 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 go out of your mind and go *all-in*?

In general, Mark had noticed, it was 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. Even more fortunately, the day after the tournament Mark played *heads-up* (man-to-man) and won three hundred in twenty minutes. "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 ten to fifteen hours a week, which is about half of what 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 gained nothing one feels that one has wasted one's time completely and so wants to play more.

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* poker is "real swordplay" where 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

Occasionally Mark might think that 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 were bought with money that was taken away from someone else. But in the end no one is forced to play. Whether they are filthy-rich capitalists, desperately poor working people or regular people like him, is all the same at the table. For him his opponents are just players. The horror stories about big losers are about the kind of people who start playing poker and want to go straight to the top, “where the luxury is.” They are lured by false hopes of winning big money but skillful players do not think like that.

If Mark thought poker was morally wrong he would want to quit. He thinks if people knew more about the game, the moral image of the game would improve. However, Mark half-jokingly says that if he were to go see a priest and make confession, the first thing he would confess would be his poker-playing. Also, Mark wants to keep quiet about his hobby. He says it is not only due to poker having a morally ambiguous image but also because he does not like to talk about how much money he has won. It is embarrassing. He also works in a job that is generally respected. For this reason poker rarely leaves the house. Mark has even gotten some promotional T-shirts from poker sites but does not want to wear them outside the house. Mark’s worries about his hobby being revealed also made him concerned about having strict protection of his identity in this paper. I was to make sure that no hints of who he is are revealed in my texts.

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.” 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 full living from this. Then sometimes I feel repulsed about how disgusting the game is.

Poker Man Avoiding 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. When he plays alone, he does not feel that he is part of a community. However, he has become a familiar visitor at some discussion forums and he is interested in champion-level games and how successful Finns are. He also often reads poker news and some poker magazines.

Mark 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.

In response to a question about what he thought about poker advertizing and its aggressive, luxurious and masculine imagery, Mark said he was not really interested. 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. It is true that good players live in luxury. The aggressiveness presented in the ads does not appeal to him either, but he admits it is a part of the game. 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, Mark 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’s important to take up any bargains.

Mark also does not care about the celebrities who endorse 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. He also does not want to endorse poker as a hobby, “perhaps because after all I think poker is a slightly dubious game morally”.

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.

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 [success] in chess is not so useful for the family. You can't buy tires for the car with it."

Poker in the Family

Mark usually plays in the bed room, 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, especially just when he is thinking deeply about something and calculating whether or not to bet a few hundred euros.

Sometimes Mark plays even in the bathroom or takes his laptop to the dinner table. These things happen when a long tournament is going on and he cannot leave the poker table for even a moment. Sometimes Mark's wife Helen helps him and *folds* for him when he has to leave the table for a while.

Usually Mark plays 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. Sometimes Mark 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's "still turned on and thinking about the game".

Mark says he is fortunate to have a wife who feels positive about his game. They have agreed on some practical points concerning the use of money and time. 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 very positive and reassuring.

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 than he gives them, 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’s parents 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.

When I interviewed Mark’s parents, I noticed their strong faith in Mark. They 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 though they were a little bit worried about Mark — which was evident only between the lines in our interviews — 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 worried that his everyday life would be too tiring for him. 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. (See Jouhki 2010b for more details of the parents’ interviews.)

Mark’s wife 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.” She thought Mark’s gaming has really benefited the family. Perhaps it helps that she has never been taught to feel negative about gambling. She has a lot of memo-

ries from her childhood about 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.

MORE BORING REALITY, PLEASE

From an anthropological point of view, I reject the narrow-minded and derogatory view of gambling as a shallow and irrational activity, driven by a desire for money and practiced principally by escapist and sensation-seeking people. This moralizing view is too often voiced in the public debate and colors also some academic works on gambling. Gambling is no more or less trivial or irrational than other activities that fascinate people. Gambling is part of our culture. (Binde, 2010.)

Professor Per Binde of the University of Gothenburg is a pioneer in the study of gambling cultures. Reading his work one easily accepts the idea that studying gambling in general or online poker in particular only as a problem has reinforced a skewed image of the cultural phenomenon. When most research is about addiction, addiction is almost everything the media report on and, further, all the information the public receive (cf. Gubrium, 2008).

There are also occasionally stories about successful poker champions in the media, but the general message especially in academia is that online poker causes addiction which causes money troubles which cause families to break up which causes marginalization. This seems an exaggeration as in reality the majority of men (97 % in Finland, for example) and women (99 % in Finland) playing online poker report that they have no gaming problem at all (*Suomalaisen rahapelaamisen vuosikirja 2009*, 2009, p. 19). Moreover, it does not seem to imply a pandemic addiction problem if *Peluuri*, the telephone service for gambling addicts, received only 86 calls concerning online poker in Finland in 2008 (ibid., p. 53). There are about 200,000 online poker players in Finland (*Poker Player Research*, 2009).

It appears that addiction is a significant problem in online poker because a hegemonic discourse demands it. Yet there are problems with every side of life and life itself is a gamble. One can have an addiction to and go too far with food, physical exercise, work, travel and sex, but still academia does not treat these areas of life merely as problems. Holistic research means sexuality is not just about venereal disease and food is not just about anorexia.

The academic view of gambling has its roots in Johan Huizinga's work. The father of *Homo Ludens* (1939) and a grand theorist of gaming was against gambling. To him, gambling games were unproductive, developed nothing cultural and gave nothing to life and the mind. Gambling was "false play". (Binde 2009, 44.) Evidently Huizinga's influential analysis was a product of his taste rather than his scholarly observation.

It often seems like the academic view of gambling offers two choices. Either gambling 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 in the postmodern world. Again, I agree that both views are immensely important and interesting. I only wish that more academic space were given to a more mundane, everyday and perhaps less attractive and dramatic view. One does not have to be a home-destroying gambling junkie to play poker, even if one plays it regularly. Nor does one have to be a postmodern digital nomad when clicking the mouse to play.

To Mark the game has been a thrilling intellectual challenge, a battle, an irritation and an abomination. He has had visions of going pro and being his own master – and of quitting the stupid game once and for all. He can see that the game has brought significant new elements into his life: excitement, money and a new hobby, but also questions of ethics, addiction, time-use, family and reputation. It is a goldmine for a researcher as well.

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ⁱ I have presented Mark's case in more detail in another paper, an article manuscript about to be published in *Fast Capitalism*.

ⁱⁱ All quotes from the interviews have been translated from Finnish to English by author.