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Jukka Jouhki

## The Grinders: Making Meaning in the Online and Offline Lives of Internet Poker Players

### Unsettling the image of an online poker player

Problem gambling affects only 1–3 percent of the gambling population but still most research on gambling is problem-oriented (Raento 2011, 76). Thus, the negative “cover story” (Gubrium 2008, 512) of gambling needs to be unsettled and complemented, because it obscures the complexities of the lived reality of mainstream gambling culture (Reith & Dobbie 2011; Matilainen & Raento 2014, 433; Jouhki 2011a, 79). Most gamblers are not the marginalized, addicted persons so often envisioned in both research and the media (Vuorento 2011; Binde 2007, 152–157): the mainstream of gambling is about entertainment, excitement, mental challenge and social value. To some it is also a profession. This article seeks to give an account of the everyday reality of active online poker players. It is about the “grinders” – the amateurs, semi-professionals and professionals who earn relatively small amounts of money over a long period of consistent, conservative play.

Thus my research question is: *How do active online poker players negotiate the meaning of the game and its position in their social surroundings?* More specifically, I am interested in how they become poker players, what kind of routines they develop, and how they perceive the meaning of money and work in the context of poker. I want to explore the meaning of poker outside of the actual game itself, in the wider social context. The research question is wide but this seems to me to be quite justified because the field is so little studied by

culturally oriented scholars (Raento 2011), and wide questions help to bring about the holistic view that is needed when examining a less familiar phenomenon. Hence, I will present some basic facts about online poker, contextualize the game briefly with some reference to the academic literature about gambling and, most importantly, bring the matter empirically closer to the reader by exploring the views of my interviewees.

Before I go into the methodological and theoretical context of the article, I must make clear some essential characteristics of poker as a game and give a brief account of its online history. Firstly, in poker, players play against each other, not against “the house” or the operator, like in card games such as Black Jack. The operator – or in internet poker, the poker room provider – finances itself by deducting a small commission called *the rake* from each pot won in a round of play. Secondly, long-term success in poker depends on skill, not luck, contrary to the persistent popular belief that poker is a game of chance like a fruit machine or roulette. Due to this misconception, the idea of a successful poker player might seem absurd to many. (Levitt & Miles 2014; Radburn & Horsley 2011, 40–41.)

Poker is a game of luck only for unskilled players. The result of each round of poker depends on how skilled the player is in estimating how much to bet in relation to the probability of having the best cards of the table. At the same time, the result of the round depends on how well the player – online or offline – manages to *appear* to others to be holding good cards (for the popular poker game *Texas Hold'em* rules, see Purdy 2005,

1–6). The former is about understanding odds, managing risk, and having logical skills, the latter is about psychological skills or, in other words, mastering the well-known art of bluffing. A good player has the patience to skip rounds when dealt bad cards and wait for good cards. A successful player should also have enough “bankroll” (money in the gaming account) to allow for the statistically probable fluctuations in the account. A player skilled in all the aforementioned can play successfully and win money. (Arnold 2003, 114–127; McCormack & Griffiths 2012; see also Radburn & Horsley 2011, 35–36; Linnet et al. 2010.)

As for the history, the first online poker site, Paradise Poker, was launched in 1998 (O’Leary & Carroll 2013, 614). Poker, like many other cultural phenomena, changed immensely when it diffused to the internet. It developed from being a marginal source of entertainment into a more mainstream hobby. (Bjerg 2011, 112; Kinnunen & Mäyrä 2014, 174–175.) At the same time it was seen more and more often on television, and when internet-educated amateurs started to win professional championship titles, the popularity of internet poker grew even more (see e.g. Raskin 2014; Jouhki 2011b, 79). Today, although the number of players is still increasing, “the poker boom,” online and offline, is said to be over. Some people claim (e.g. Earle 2013) that it was a classic speculative bubble, but it seems more reasonable to say that the competition has increased.

### **Theoretical and methodological context**

Online poker can be studied in the context of computer games, sports, recreation, or as one of the countless cultural phenomena manifesting the very primordial need to take risks and be entertained (Jouhki 2011a; O’Leary & Carroll 2013; Schuck 2010; Svartsjö et al 2008, 13). Gambling also offers interesting avenues to explore the cultural meanings of work and professionalism. In Finland, for example, it seems like traditional conceptions of wage labor, a “decent” profession and a regular salary are still important indicators of a person’s value and status (see e.g. Melin 2007;

Hoikkala et al. 2006), and this in turn influences people’s views of professional gambling, as we shall see later in this article.

I have chosen not to situate the data that I gathered in any specific theoretical approach. Nor am I observing poker players exclusively in the context of game studies. As Jani Kinnunen (2010), a Finnish sociologist studying gaming and gambling, has observed, the element of financial investment and the lack of self-purposeful play have made poker sit rather uneasily in the mainstream discipline of game studies. Acknowledging this, I will provide only a brief, but an eclectic summary of the research literature on gambling, in order to contextualize online poker as an object of culturally oriented research. With a principle similar to grounded theory, I will try not to preconceptualize or frame online poker too strongly but instead, drawing on my own and other players’ experiences, to familiarize the reader essayistically (e.g. Cornelissen et al. 2012, 198–199; Jackson 2011) with the game as a cultural phenomenon, using first-hand accounts in order to do so.

The moral value attributed to gambling depends on a given sociocultural context (Raento 2014, 18). In some parts of the world, gambling might be a generally valued hobby or even a part of a religious ritual. In Europe, however, gambling has been commonly denounced as immoral. (Binde 2005a; Binde 2005b). At the same time it has been widely practiced among the European elites (e.g. McMillen 2005, 245–247; Moss 2005, 385–386), and among the other classes many forms of gambling have been so normalized that they are not even considered gambling. For example, most Finns nowadays would view buying a lottery ticket every week as a legitimate and even respectable activity while these same people might be shocked at the idea of spending time at the roulette table (Matilainen 2011, 89).

In Finland the majority of people gamble regularly, and almost all Finns have gambled at some point in their lives. However, Finns seem to have a particular way of relating to gambling money. If money is won, it is to varying degrees considered “dirty” or “unreal” because it is gained without (proper) merit. (Matilainen 2014, 166; see

also Kinnunen 2010, 48–50.) In contrast, various automated money games are widely available at places like kiosks, shops, gas stations and restaurants – and for more than a decade now, on the internet – so the actual prevalence of gambling in Finland indicates a more liberal attitude (Raento 2014, 9–16).

A non-professional gambler often loses money, so the motivation to gamble is not only financial. Apart from being paid entertainment, gambling is inherently social, as Clifford Geertz (1972) noticed already in his classic anthropological study: it reinforces social relations and alliances. Social bonds are significant even in internet gambling, even if there they come about more in situations outside of the game or among players in virtual arenas (Kinnunen 2011, 86–87; Kinnunen & Mäyrä 2014, 174–175). Internet poker is often played alone but poker players do share a sense of community: they are bound by their shared hobby in discussions, discussion forums, live poker playing, and of course their special poker jargon. This kind of loose, postmodernist sporadic form of communality resonates well with Michel Maffesoli's (1996) thesis on neo-tribalism.

Professional poker players are in a minority but their influence on poker as a cultural phenomenon is significant (Bjerg 2011, 112). Another important factor is that online poker is predominantly a young man's hobby. In Finland, it is most popular among 20–29 year olds, whereas Finns above 50 years of age practically never play poker on the internet. The gender difference is also clear: 13 % of Finnish men have played online poker compared to 1.7 % of women. The gap is even more visible when comparing the numbers of active online poker players: 6 % of males vs. 0.2 % of females. (Mäyrä & Ermi 2014.) These statistical data reflect the national as well as universal tendency for gambling – and risk-taking in general – to be a male-dominated activity (Matilainen & Raento 2014, 440–441; Harris & Jenkins 2006). This has even led some scholars to view the adoption of gambling as a hobby as a young male's rite of passage, reflecting the daring, self-determination and independent decision-making that connote adulthood (e.g. Matilainen & Raento 2014, 442; Reith & Dobbie 2011, 489–491).

For the majority of players online poker is an activity like any other type of entertainment that costs money (McManus 2009; Schwartz 2007, 447–494; Kinnunen & Paloheimo 2007). Statistically, these “fish” – or the less skilled and entertainment-oriented players with lose money – are the willing source of the income of the more skilled players (McCormack & Griffiths 2012; Turja et al. 2012; Levitt & Miles 2014; Kinnunen & Mäyrä 2014, 175). For this study I interviewed six male online poker players (see table below), three of whom can be categorized as professionals, two as semi-professionals and one as an amateur player<sup>1</sup>. One of the two semi-professionals is my key informant, Timo (pseudonym<sup>2</sup>), a childhood friend of mine whom I have visited in western Finland regularly during the past decade. Several years ago I learned that Timo had begun to play internet poker, so I asked him if I could engage in a series of micro-ethnographic fieldwork periods (see e.g. Atkinson et al. 2007, 191) in his household. As Timo had no objection, I observed Timo's gaming routines, interviewed him various times, and interviewed his wife and his parents, who lived in the vicinity. In addition, I had plenty of ad hoc conversations about gambling and related issues with Timo and with members of his family. These micro-ethnographic periods rarely lasted more than a few hours at a time but they amounted to dozens of fieldwork hours and a vast collection of field notes.

The other participants in the study were only interviewed. Apart from the interview with the non-professional player, Pekka, which was conducted in 2014 to include the experiences of an amateur poker player in the data, all the interviews were carried out between 2010 and 2013. All of the participants but Pekka were also briefly re-interviewed in 2014 either by phone, Facebook or email to keep the data up to date. The updates, short as they were (e.g. 10 to 20 minutes on the phone), proved to be very fruitful in providing insight into the temporally transient nature of online poker as a gaming activity: most of the interviewees had by that time taken significant new steps in their gaming career.

In addition to the interviews and the micro-ethnographic fieldwork periods, I conducted a

Pseudonym	Approx. age	Education	Profession	Relationship status	Active poker experience	Gaming level	Year of interview
Rauno	early 40s	university	civil servant	cohabiting	8 years	semi-pro	2012
Timo	late 30s	university	civil servant	married, 2 children	9 years	semi-pro	2011
Kimmo	early 20s	high school	poker player	recently separated	5 years	pro	2012
Stig	late teens	high school	poker player	in a relationship	5 years	pro	2012
Ville	early 20s	university student	poker player	single	5 years	pro	2013
Pekka	late 20s	vocational	technician	divorced, 1 child	10 years	amateur	2014
Jukka	late 30s	university	researcher	married, 1 child	1 year	amateur	N/A (auto-ethnography)

Table. The participants at the time of their first interview.

12-month auto-ethnography (see e.g. Uotinen 2010) in 2013, during which I actively played online poker for money (for a minimum of 4 hrs. a week), and kept a detailed fieldwork journal, a shortened version of which is publicly available in Finnish at <http://vuosipokeristani.blogspot.fi>. More than 200 hours of online poker resulted in hundreds of field journal entries after or (when possible) during each gaming session, as well as in reflections and observations outside of the game. My motivation as a researcher-player was different from the imagined average poker player. During my fieldwork, I usually really liked playing poker, enjoying the mental challenge and the excitement, but there were times, particularly toward the end of the year, when I felt I *had* to play even if I did not feel like it because I was tired, had other work to do or wanted to spend time with my family. (See Fingerroos & Jouhki 2014, 90–93 for further discussion of the position of a researcher-player.) At any rate, I consider that my auto-ethnographic approach deepened my understanding of the meaning of the game for poker players. I learned first-hand what it is like to invest money in poker, how exciting it is to win and how frustrating it is to lose but, perhaps more importantly, what it is like to identify oneself as

a poker player and try to negotiate the place of poker in the wider social context.

### Player profiles

When I started to look for potential interviewees, I did not especially search for successful players but rather I looked for amateurs, “high rollers” (large-stake players), “fish” (players who lose money), “grinders” (consistently winning players), women or men, young or old. I asked around, and eventually settled quite randomly on six players willing to be interviewed. Financially, the most successful of them earned more than many owners of big businesses, two of them earned enough to support themselves, and another two made enough to get significant amounts of extra money to supplement their salaries. The last interviewee, the amateur, played well enough not to lose money. I myself was the least successful participant, ending up slightly on the debit side when my poker year was over and I balanced my accounts.

One should note that in general, the majority of online poker players, the amateurs, lose a little money or hover just above zero income. Thus most of the participants in this study represent

the more successful minority of online poker players. Only two participants, the other amateur and I, represent the non-professional majority. At the same time, we all played the same game, and thus shared many of the common experiences of poker playing. I think it is important in this article to present both the similarities and differences in the experiences of this heterogeneous group, starting from how they all began to play online poker, so first, I will briefly introduce each interviewee and their views on poker.

*Rauno*, a civil servant in his 40s, mainly played long tournaments during weekends, and earned “enough to make a few small holiday trips every year”. When I asked Rauno what had made him a successful player, he replied “it is a combination of daring and patience [...] but you have to understand to quit when you feel like others are playing like shit and you are playing well but still losing.” Rauno thought of himself as a normal poker player because he kept rather quiet about his hobby.

Most players play every now and then while surfing the net. They aren't obsessive or blabbering about it in online forums or interested in the intricacies of strategy. [...] There are some two or three hundred thousand poker players [in Finland], and I think I'm a part of their quiet majority.

*Timo*, another civil servant in his late 30s, was my key informant. At the height of his poker-playing career Timo was earning an amount equal to one half of his salary. His “symbolic goal” was to win at least enough money to cover the monthly rent of their apartment. Timo was very careful about his anonymity as he did not want his colleagues to know that he played poker. The first thing Timo told me about poker was that everybody can win rather easily, but it is what you do when you lose that defines you as a poker player:

At that particular moment, when you have lost a lot and wonder what to do next. Do you have enough sense to shut down the computer and go to bed or do you go all dark in the head and bet all your money?

*Pekka*, a technician in his late 20s, had the longest poker-playing career of the interviewees

– and also the steadiest one. He played regularly (once or twice a week) but with small bets and without significant losses or winnings. Pekka was not very interested in the poker community although he had read a poker manual by a Finnish poker professional. I asked Pekka what kind of player he thought he was.

I am really not a very qualified player. Apparently poker doesn't interest me enough to make me want to practice and develop myself to actually make any money. Though I haven't lost money either. [...] So I've kept it up, if I've had any spare time and I haven't thought of anything else to do. So I've just played for no particular reason. It's just fun.

*Kimmo*, a poker professional in his early 20s, was financially the most successful player of the participants; he was among the top Finnish poker players, earning as much as ten times more than the other professionals interviewed for this study. At school he used to be “gifted but lazy,” but “pretty good” at mental arithmetic. He explained why he had succeeded in poker:

I don't get nervous when it goes downhill. [...] I'm a typical young poker player who has liked video games. Poker is just another video game and I've become good at it. [...] For me it's the first game where being good has benefited me.

When I interviewed *Stig* for the first time, he had just returned from a trip to southern Europe, where he had been participating in a live poker tournament. He was almost 20 years old, and making a living from poker while still living at home with his parents. He seemed happy about “the job”. Of all the participants he was perhaps the most positive in his view of poker. He liked going to poker tournaments and engaging with the poker society as much as he liked “grinding” at the computer. He also enjoyed traveling and spending the money he had earned on the small luxuries of life or on presents for his girlfriend. To me, *Stig* was the antithesis of a problem gambler.

*Ville*, another professional in his early 20s, was a university student supporting himself through

poker. At the time of the first interview he had not been playing for a month, but he considered playing poker to be his summer job because he did not feel like having a “real” job, as he described it. He was having a break because he had increasingly begun to question the value of poker and its dominant role in his life. Ville’s view of poker seemed more negative than that of any of the other participants.

*I myself* played actively for the 12 months of my auto-ethnographic research period. Financially, I clearly stayed at the amateur level and lost more money than I won. At the beginning of the year it was important for me to prove to myself that I could play and win regularly. When I finally managed to do so, I seemed to lose interest in the game, and played worse for the latter part of the year. Nevertheless, I felt poker was an interesting intellectual and mental challenge and worth the experience, but my interest remained largely academic.

### How it begins

Before they started to play online poker and particularly *Texas Hold'em* (the most popular type of poker), all of the participants had played simpler forms of poker with friends, brothers or fathers. All of the participants became interested in online poker during the height of the poker boom (in the mid 2000s), starting just for fun and to see if they could win a little money. Kimmo, the most successful professional, told me: “I was about 17 and a half when I deposited some of my own money [200 e] into my friend’s poker account, and I’m still on that road. First, I didn’t have any plans, it was just fun.” I could easily relate to the general motivation the participants felt: when I had my first financially successful gaming session, I was thrilled just to win 2 cents. At the end of my first financially successful poker month, March 2013, I was the proud winner of a total of 7.69 dollars. Such a small sum had strong symbolic meaning: I felt I had proved that I belonged to the category of players that can play poker successfully, even if my winnings amounted to no more than a few dollars.

Ville told me he practiced by playing “freeroll” tournaments: “My brother used to tell me about freerolls, these tournaments where you could play for free. You couldn’t lose, only win.” I myself never felt comfortable playing a full-length tournament since one tournament could last for several hours. However, Ville and his brother would set up their own poker-playing accounts even though they were under age, and soon Ville and a friend of his participated in a 6000-player tournament. They finished in 9<sup>th</sup> place:

We won something like 360 dollars, and were TOTALLY excited. I remember when we got to the final table, we fetched my dad to see, you know, look how well we’re doing. It was such a cool experience!

All of the participants had started to play online poker in the “smallest tables”, meaning that they could bring only 2 to 5 dollars or euros<sup>3</sup> to a single table to bet in the game. All of the players used to play a lot of “freerolls” as well. Most of the participants also read poker manuals, watched televised poker and online tutorial videos and discussed poker with their friends. As for myself, I did get hold of a few poker manuals but I was too lazy to read them. I also watched some televised poker and YouTube poker clips of “high roller” games, but did it more for entertainment and to get to know the jargon than to improve my game. My most important guide to poker was my key informant, Timo, who would give me some small pieces of advice every now and then, and whom I would observe play. A lot of poker, however, is about learning as you go. Online poker – unlike live poker – allows hundreds or even thousands of played rounds per hour, so a receptive and motivated player can improve his/her game relatively fast.

The older participants clearly had a more negative conception of poker before they started to play than the younger participants. For example, Rauno had played a little stud poker in his youth with friends and a little machine draw poker, and his image of real-money poker was more about “bar tables, and darkly lit casinos” or “the darker side of poker.” Before he got to know a poker-playing friend he did not even know internet poker

existed. “And when I followed his game for five hours, I got interested in it myself.” In the following week Rauno tried out some freeroll tournaments. “In my first tournament I won one whole euro [laughs] but practically without even knowing the rules.” Then Rauno ordered a poker manual, and read up on the rules and tactics.

According to Pekka the amateur, his father “would just spend a few hours on weekends playing, just for fun. A small hobby.” Then he let Pekka try too: “At some point I happened to set up my own account at Paradise Poker. [...] I think I received a 50-euro starting bonus, and my dad sponsored me a bit.”

### The routines of play

All of the participants except Pekka had been playing poker very actively (in other words, many times a week) when I first interviewed them. Timo told me he spent 10 to 30 hours a week playing poker. He thought he played a little too much:

When you have played for, say, five hours and you're losing, you feel like you've wasted your time unless you win. You don't think about the possibility of continuing it the next day. You want to win *now*.

Many players preferred playing in the late evening or at night. Timo, for example, played after his children had gone to bed, and the young professionals played even later at night to synchronize their game with American players. Only Pekka said he played early in the evening because he did not want to ruin his night's sleep. I myself also noticed that late evening, when my wife and daughter were asleep, was the best time for me. However, I had to get up in the morning to go to work, so playing poker meant many tired mornings. Interestingly, although as a paid researcher a part of my work was actually to play poker, I felt too ashamed to do it at work. Also, the fewer people there were around and the fewer other things there were to do, the better my concentration was. All the other participants agreed with this in their interviews. Moreover, we all felt that poker demands such intense concentration that

one needs some time to cool off or calm down after playing if one wants to sleep well.

Kimmo, the financially most successful player, told me about his daily schedule:

So I used<sup>4</sup> to go to bed after my girlfriend woke up, slept when she was at school and woke up when she came home. Then I spent the evening with her. That was my most common and longest lasting regular daily schedule. So, I really never left the house because I was either playing or being with her at home.

Ville said he liked playing poker a lot but did not like the fact that poker was so dominant in his life. In the future he said he would try not to play too much. I asked him what exactly was “too much” for him, and he replied:

Well, if you play five hours every day, it's pretty tiring. It's so intensive. At least for me... so much adrenaline. Sure, some people might play ten hours a day for a month if they have some sort of competition. But for me, five hours a day is a lot.

Ville was also the only one who tried to play during the day. Others thought day-time poker was too populated with professionals. Stig, for example, told me that he played between 10 pm and 3 am, when there were fewer distractions and perhaps more “fish” (meaning bad players) online.

Rauno played evenings and nights as well but mostly on weekends because that is when he had time to play long tournaments. He estimated that he spent a total of about twenty hours a week playing poker. “Friday and Saturday... go by... well, if a tournament goes well for me it lasts 8 to 9 hours. If you drop out after a few hours, you start another one.”

Pekka said he played a few times a week for about an hour at a time, usually between 5 pm and 7 pm on a working day. He rarely played on weekends because he had “other things to do”, by which he meant socializing with friends and family. If he happened to play on the weekend, the game might go on until 10 pm, not later. On a regular poker night Pekka would play a maximum of four quick “sit & go” tournaments<sup>5</sup>, each



one lasting about half an hour. “And often I’m too tired to play more – or even to concentrate. If I play more, my concentration becomes a little... It isn’t fun or sensible anymore.”

“It’s a lot of waiting”, Kimmo said to me about his poker routines. After the interview I happened to come across a filmed interview<sup>6</sup> with Kimmo where, at one point, a well-known Finnish live poker champion was making fun of Kimmo’s preference for online poker over live casino poker. To this Kimmo replied,

Live poker is basically fun if the stakes are high enough but in the casino it’s usually just about waiting around. I prefer waiting around at home – I sit in my boxers and watch some series on TV – to waiting at the casino watching grumpy old men. It’s actually more profitable to be the dealer of the table than a player. But I’m lucky that I like sitting at the computer and watching TV series. I don’t mind it at all. It’s fun.

Kimmo played a special type of poker called Heads Up, in which only two players compete with each other. He told me that while waiting for suitable players he looked at Facebook, chatted with friends, browsed the internet and watched TV shows. He would do “anything that you can do that is easy to quit the moment a good game begins.” All the other participants brought up the element of waiting as well, and for me too it was a very significant element of poker. The patience to wait for good cards and still keep one’s concentration was actually a very significant skill that distinguished risk-taking entertainment-oriented players from “the grinders”. Even Pekka, the amateur, had noticed the waiting aspect of poker.

Earlier, I might have played around on the guitar when I was waiting for a fresh hand [= dealt cards]. But that kind of poker doesn’t work for me, not at all. At least I’ve noticed myself that you have to have full concentration. The minute your thoughts begin to wander, you’re totally out of the game and it won’t go right. And it isn’t even fun or sensible anyway – even if you aren’t after winnings. You have to concentrate.

For this reason Pekka preferred a rapid game mode and avoided long tournaments:

The reason why I very rarely play any *real* tournaments is because it requires stupid amounts of time. I can’t concentrate that long – and I don’t even feel like it. It’s not fun anymore. These mini tournaments like sitters [Sit & Go, or “sittari” in Finnish] are perfect for me.

### Symbolic money

All of the participants were quite well aware of how much money they were making playing poker. None of the participants said they would play poker if there was no money involved in it. The game without money would just not be interesting enough. To Pekka, the least active player, poker was more like an occasional hobby. His stakes were low, approximately 5 euros a session, and he estimated that he never won or lost much. He had deposited 30 euros in his gaming account a year ago, and had not yet had to top it up, so he deduced that he was doing well enough to keep up the hobby. To him the 5 euro “buy-in” (an entry fee) for a game was a necessary ingredient to make the game interesting, to motivate him.

At the other extreme was Kimmo, a “high roller” making a lot of money at poker. In a way he had a gambling problem because he was making too much money playing. He was worried about the way he measured time. Any time spent away from the poker tables meant a loss in poker winnings to him. Kimmo estimated:

I’m doing really well at poker but it has led to measuring everything... in money. I mean it is SO profitable to play that about everything I do in life, I think “If I go there now, it’ll cost me 200 euros an hour. So is it worth it?” So it’s kind of twisted how it goes [...]. I mean, greed easily takes over. I haven’t thought of it as a problem until recently.

Stig and others did not think that time was money, at least not as seriously as Kimmo did. Stig emphasized that he always wanted to make sure that if there was a social event or any other

interesting event going on that he would enjoy, he would go and not feel bad about the loss of income during that time. Kimmo, on the other hand, thought that now was the time for him to “work hard” at poker, sharing the widespread belief that the increasing competition would make poker money more difficult to win in the future. There were still a lot of “fish” in the sea but also more good players after their loose money. Money seemed to be the one and only reason for Kimmo to play poker. He even played the one single type of Texas Hold’em that he knew would give him maximum profit. Kimmo seemed to think that he had made some serious social sacrifices when choosing his profession but that he still had to take advantage of the great financial opportunity that it gave him:

Opportunities like this don’t come that often where you can make so much money for your future. I mean, if I now decided that I wanted to rest and just take it easy for five years, I would have the money. I mean, I could really just not do anything. Just go back-packing in Asia and be there for five years without doing any work.

Many participants told me that money changes its meaning when it enters the game: one simply cannot relate to poker money as regular, everyday money. Timo also talked about the concept of “scared money”, which meant playing badly when you had less money to spend.

It’s a symbolic thing. You know that you *can* play well and that you *are* good enough against your opponents but when you have a small stack [of gaming chips] you are *afraid* to play right. You feel timid. You aren’t self-assured enough to play boldly enough. And when you are not bold enough, others can take advantage of your insecurity. They bet, you withdraw, and you lose what you’ve put in the middle [of the table].

Most of the semi-professionals and professionals seemed to think of their winnings not in terms of the amount of money itself but in terms of the positive ways in which they could spend it – what they could do or buy with the money.

Timo’s goal was to earn enough to pay the rent every month, and Stig and Rauno measured their winnings in the trips they could take with their girlfriends, but Ville did not come up with anything comparable.

The last time I won a lot I did try to think... but couldn’t think of anything to spend it on. In general my lifestyle is pretty expensive already I guess. We do live quite a luxurious life, go to restaurants to eat and go out a lot in general. Other than that I don’t have any [desires].

I asked Ville, then, what the meaning of poker money was to him, and after thinking about it for a long time he said,

Well you tend to spend money in a whole different way than if you had worked [sic!] for it, I am aware of that. Somehow... you just can’t care that much [...] And the money is also some sort of a measure [of skill] as well.

Rauno also said that when he started to play poker, the money was more like an indication of skill in the game. He did not really play with “financial money”. I could also relate to that, because winning even a few cents, or sometimes simply not losing anything, meant to me that I was at least a little skilled. Rauno further described his attitude to poker money, which proved to be a rather complex issue:

You don’t really think of poker as playing with money. Still, winning money is nice and playing without money would be [boring]. [...] So if I buy a set of rims for our car, I might take the money from the gaming account and then really feel like the hobby is worth something. So the meaning of money in the poker game is very small, although it’s looming there in the background. On the other hand, it’s a moment of joy when you win a significant amount of *chips* – which is indeed money [laughs] – but you don’t think about it as money until it materializes at some point. [...] But you can’t think about poker money like it’s *real*... But... well... maybe my kind of thinking doesn’t spawn any professionals either... I guess they play their money more sensibly.

The symbolic value of having to deposit more money in one's gaming account is often negative: it means that you have not been skilled enough to make your investment grow. Kimmo, for example, seemed proud that he had not once had to deposit money after his initial investment several years before. Timo also seemed to feel that depositing money was something of a mood-breaker. Rauno told me that whenever he had a "bad beat" (long period of bad luck) and his "bankroll" (available money in the gaming account) had fallen to close to zero, he would try hard to "battle himself out of the hole" although he could easily have just deposited some extra money: "It's also fun to try to make a small amount grow bigger."

I asked Pekka about the sums he invested in poker, and he said he would usually pay five euros per quick tournament, because "there's no sense in going there [to bigger tables, more expensive games] to waste it. Of course it is still a small sum but still. Amateur spirit, you know!" When I asked him if he had any particularly memorable highlights in his poker career, he mentioned a freeroll tournament in which he did not win any money but he did win the tournament.

I guess there were about a couple thousand players in this one, and I won it. Came first. And it was only... It didn't even have a prize but you just won your way to the next tournament with a hundred players who had survived the previous tournaments.

### **The grinder's work and ethic**

None of the participants thought of poker as harmfully addictive or immoral per se. My key informant, Timo, was the only one to state explicitly that he had occasionally reflected on the morality of the game, but in the end he always concluded that every player could choose whether to play or not. He reasoned that he was not doing anything wrong playing poker. When Timo told me how some investors sponsor professional poker-players, I asked him teasingly whether sponsoring him would be like giving booze to an alcoholic. He replied, "No. More like giving running spikes to a sprinter." However, there were other kinds

of moral undercurrents in the interviews about poker which I could easily understand as a result of my own experiences. Stig was the only one who had nothing negative to say about poker as a profession. Nobody else really felt that poker would be a good profession, but to Stig, poker was a good source of income, new friends and travel. "Also, it's nicer to play poker and earn money than go to work at McDonald's for example." However, he did plan on getting an education too, "just in case". In contrast, even Kimmo, who was making hundreds of thousands of euros a year, thought of poker as merely "an iron that needs to be struck while it's hot". At the same time, he tried to think about other, more meaningful things to do for a living. He was worried about how poker limited his social life. In the same vein, Ville told me that in the end he really did not care how good he was at poker because it was not a very valuable way to earn one's living anyway:

I couldn't stand [being a professional for life]. And I don't want to be one. Think about it – you're winning money from someone else. It isn't exactly improving any kind of well-being in the world. It's kind of selfish – or a VERY selfish activity.

Timo told me he often caught himself planning a possible professional career in poker, but "to be fair," he said, "I'm as often just utterly disgusted with the game." He said poker would impoverish his life too much if it was a full-time profession. It was a good hobby and a source of extra income. Even the amateur Pekka had the same thoughts:

A few months ago I did pick up my poker book again and started to reflect on my own gaming style, and how I should improve it to make some profit, and it did feel pretty alluring, you know. If you could just stay home independently, and earn your living and not have to go to regular work. [...] But I would still rather go to the job I'm at than sit who knows for how many hours a day at a computer. I'd rather go and see people.

Rauno told me he had never wanted to become a professional poker player. In his view, a professional would have to

have a TERRIBLE passion to learn the game well. I just don't have it. I don't want to spend my days and nights studying my own hands and wondering how I could have played this better.

Like Ville and Kimmo were worried about the dominating role of poker in their lives, Timo too would tell me how he often felt bad about letting poker influence his mood so much. Poker was a good source of income for him but the scale of emotions that came with it bothered him.

I'm troubled by how the different moods affect me. Sometimes – even when I've won a lot and have been happy about it – I might be troubled by the mere influence of poker on my mood. Like, "Is this a proper reason to be happy? Don't I have any other reason to be happy?" [...] And then, when you've lost, say, a thousand in one hour, apathy or depression sets in, and you just stare at the telly and think that you're awfully stupid. [...] Then I say to myself, "I'll quit and never play again. I'll focus on the family and kids and do all things fun." [...] So, these kinds of thoughts [laughs]. But when everything's on an up, you think that you should quit your day job and go pro. [...] So you notice the wide scale of emotions here?

Kimmo spoke along the same lines:

Only recently I have started to think that I should do different things in life. [...] I don't think it's THAT bad a thing if you're hard working. It's just that the quality of life suffers if you devote everything to [poker] so badly.

### **The social configurations around poker**

The more financially successful the player was, the more socially involved in poker culture he seemed to be. To Kimmo "poker culture" was,

of course interesting because it's such a big part of my everyday life. I don't take part in student culture or work – so that's what I have. It's perhaps not my only object of interest but definitely the most dominant, for sure.

Timo did not care much about poker socially because he valued having a low profile. He would not even wear in public a promotional poker T-shirt he had received from a poker site as a gift. However, he read poker-related news every day, and he would also read some poker magazines and follow some professionals, like any fan. Mostly, however, he "just wanted to win a little and get something good for the family." Rauno, another semi-professional, agreed with Timo but Pekka, the amateur, was even less involved. He knew only one poker champion by name, and only one other poker player – his father – personally. He was not even sure whether the poker terminology he used was correct. Pekka had not even seen *Rounders* (1998), the movie all of the other participants said was their favorite poker film. Pekka explained: "My poker playing is such a small hobby [...]. I just play quietly and just for my own amusement [...] and I haven't made a lot of noise about it either."

Poker as a hobby or a profession takes time, and often the time used affects the people around the player. As regards the position of poker in the context of the players' close relationships, it was not on the whole a problem. Rauno told me his wife did not have any particularly strong feelings about his poker hobby.

Sometimes she might nag a little but on the other hand she's ok with the extra money [...]. Maybe sometimes when she tells me to take the dog out, I might say "no can do, just let him go out by himself." You know, without kids we don't have those kinds of responsibilities...

Stig also told me his girlfriend was not bothered one way or the other about him playing poker. He said he thought she liked the fact that because of the poker playing they can travel around. "And perhaps she gets a bit nicer presents as well", he added. Kimmo, on the other hand, wondered if his devotion to poker had distanced him from his former girlfriend, and even caused their break-up.

All of the participants had more or less understanding relatives as far as poker was concerned. Only Ville's father had often been critical and told him to get a "real job" because he thought he would

eventually lose his money. Stig, who was still living with his parents at the time of the first interview, told me he sometimes argued with his parents about the time spent playing poker, especially on school nights. Like many of the other interviewees' parents, Stig's parents did not necessarily understand much about poker, but they could easily see that Stig had been playing successfully, so they were not worried about him losing money.

When I interviewed Timo's parents, it was evident that they trusted him because they could see how poker had increased Timo's family's standard of living. If they were at all worried about Timo, their fear was that he might be burdening himself too much earning extra money, and perhaps be spending too much time away from the family. In contrast, Timo's wife felt surprisingly positive about poker. She told me that she even felt a bit guilty about not playing poker herself: "I'm the one sitting on the sofa and watching television! That doesn't benefit us at all." However, she knew enough poker to stand in for Timo when it was Timo's turn to put the children to bed. She would skip bad cards for Timo at the computer, and if she was dealt good cards, she would immediately call Timo to come and take over the game.

Kimmo told me his parents did not seem worried about him playing poker. Maybe they did not really know what he was doing, or perhaps they were indifferent.

Perhaps there was a big change [in their attitude] when I bought an apartment in [the city] when I was 20. It was like they noticed that there was something to it, it wasn't like working at McDonald's or something. So it was, like, a big relief for them. Like it's not a totally wasted youth.

There was a stark difference between the poker-related social circles of the professionals and of the other interviewees. Rauno and Timo, the semi-professionals, each had only one poker-playing friend. They both told me that they would play with their friend whenever they met, have a few beers together and join different tournaments. All the non-professionals thought of live poker as rather intimidating, mostly because they were not sure about the etiquette. Only Pekka had dared to

try it a few times, but even he did not feel comfortable with it: "I felt kind of lost, and it didn't go well at all." Timo told me he still thought of live poker as "the *real* poker". The non-professionals' poker community was thus almost totally virtual and mediated. Timo and Rauno knew what was happening in the poker world but they never physically met any other players. Pekka did not even read the poker news, and he met other poker players only in the game. For the younger professionals, however, poker was more about lifestyle. They did not have day jobs, so they played poker for work, and spent most of their free time with poker-playing friends. For fun, they would sometimes have some beers and go to the casino to play live poker. That was done almost purely for social reasons, however; they said that making money in live poker was too slow a business for them.

## Revealing updates

When I re-interviewed the participants in 2014, I was surprised to learn about the different paths they had followed. Rauno, one of the semi-professionals, had already almost completely stopped playing poker a year before. He now played roughly one tournament a month. He explained: "I can play some tournaments but only if I'm really bored [laughs]. [...] Also, nowadays I go to bed way earlier than I used to [laughs]." During our most recent interviews in 2014, Timo, my semi-professional key informant, also told me he had reduced his playing time dramatically, and played now only occasionally. Although both men blamed the heightened competition for their recent lack of play, Timo did tell me he had started to reconsider the value of the time he spent on poker. Nowadays, hobbies that the whole family could share were taking up a lot of Timo's former poker-playing time:

I'm still interested in poker, and I'm still trying to think of ways to do it in a reasonable... so that it would fit the normal rhythm of life. After all, it does give one nice feelings, nice excitement. And the new hobbies I have, they're with the family, and they don't cause such oscillation of emotions like poker does. They're more stable. They are enjoyable but

they never cause tilting<sup>8</sup> [...] But I do sit in front of the computer even now. The difference to poker is that now I can separate myself more quickly from the computer. So I'm more present in the everyday life of the family.

Even Kimmo, the most successful player among the participants, had reduced the amount of time he spent playing because his favorite type of poker game was not yielding that much income anymore. In addition, he had already made enough money to become a silent partner in a friend's business. Before, Kimmo had sensed that his success was not going to last for very long, and he was right. He had indeed struck while the iron was hot. In the end, Pekka the amateur and Stig the professional were the only ones who were sure that they would keep on playing in the future too. Pekka told me:

I guess I'll try slowly to improve my game to keep it interesting. It's quite a lot of fun just consciously improving yourself. But it's hard to say how long poker will interest me.

In contrast to the other money-making players, Stig had become even more successful than before. At the time of the second interview, he had just returned from a poker tournament in Europe and was living with his girlfriend. He had these reflections to offer on his success:

I started to play poker *after* the boom was over, so I've learned how to play in this harsh climate and have done well even so. People say it's hard to make a living in poker these days. I've developed with the game, so to speak. The old grunts have had to digest so much new stuff that many of them haven't kept up. [...] But I'm sure next year I'll have to work like hell. [...] Without proper zest and motivation it's hard to win in games nowadays.

Stig also told me he had just won a prize in a national championship tournament and had recently visited Las Vegas for the first time, which was "an awesome experience". This was the first year that Stig had played as a completely independent professional: he lived in his own home

and paid his own bills. "Everything has gone well, so I must be satisfied. I have to say poker is – in addition to my girlfriend – one of the most important things in my life right now."

Ville, on the other hand, despite being a successful professional, had totally quit playing poker soon after the first interview. He had not liked the dominance of poker in his life, but he did not want to elaborate more on his decision. As for myself, I had something in common with Ville. Even though I played relatively little and the money was not – at least economically – significant to me, I did not like how dominant poker was in my life. In the beginning, I was very excited to try poker and learn enough to play successfully, but toward the end of the year I realized I was not finding it exciting enough to want to keep playing it just for fun. I also realized I preferred other forms of entertainment that were not so reclusive in nature. Perhaps most importantly, however, I found that I had neither the perseverance nor the motivation to play poker more seriously and to concentrate more on winning, and if I did not win, the game did not seem very interesting to me. Thus, I was a wanna-be "grinder" with the playing habits of a "fish". In the year following my auto-ethnographic period I tried poker half a dozen times and I did have some exciting sessions, but not enough to keep the hobby active.

In the end I was happy that my 12 months of poker was over, not because I did not like the excitement or the challenge but mostly because it was too unsociable for me. After the year was over, whenever I had some free time to myself, I would still often think about playing poker, but I generally decided to do something else: watch a movie or TV, read a book or go out or just be lazy in a way that did not require concentration. During my auto-ethnographic study I played for only about four hours a week, but it was often on week nights, and I often felt guilty about playing instead of spending time with my family. In retrospect, and considering the attitudes of all my interviewees – except for the level-headed amateur Pekka and the increasingly successful Stig – the only gambling "problem" we all had was not so much the money as the question of whether poker was a meaningful way of spending one's time.

### Final words: poker as “a tough way to make an easy living”

As the ironic quote (Bjerg 2011, 111) above suggests, the reality of successful poker playing goes against the common stereotype. Grinding is the slow, deliberate, demanding process of playing poker successfully. All of the players I interviewed were grinders in the sense that winning money was everyone’s goal and anything other than grinding would have meant losing money. What varied was only how much money they won and how much time they spent playing. In the end, online poker can be viewed as a good example of postmodern consumer culture, an activity in which work and play intersect, and break their traditional binary opposition. This, however, often causes moral alarm within and outside of the culture. (Erickson & Murphy 2008, 113–114; Jouhki 2010).

Attitudes toward gambling have become more tolerant. This relates to the rise of the “affluent society”. Consumption and leisure are valued more than before, so consumer-citizens are allowed to spend – and earn – their money as they wish, and choose their own lifestyles. (Binde 2005b, 469.) In Finland, gambling with cards was widely considered a “game of threat” (In Finnish: “uhkapeli”), which is the pejorative term for gambling in Finnish. Nowadays, attitudes toward poker are changing in line with shifts in current values: poker is increasingly called a “money game”, “a game of skill” or “gambling”, depending on the moral stance of the speaker. Reflecting the general liberalization of morals, the Finnish government’s attitude to online poker has been similar historically to its attitude to alcohol: moving from prohibition to controlled monopoly. In a way, members of the poker community are digital nomads (Patokorpi 2006, 102–105), the hunter-gatherers of the cyber age looking for “game”, scrounging for scattered resources, and searching for fresh “hunting grounds” equal to their skills and resources.

However, the issue of the moral value of professional gambling still remains open. A well-

known American poker professional, Mike Caro, said that the most difficult things in playing poker professionally are “coping emotionally with the losses and coping with the recurring idea that you’re not doing anything worthwhile” (quoted in Bjerg 2011, 111). Both issues, but especially the latter, emerged from the experiences of most of my interviewees as well (see also Wood & Griffiths 2008, 94; Radburn & Horsley 2011, 37 for similar observations). I suggest that poker players’ identities are still influenced by traditional definitions of gambling – the waste of time, the social problem – although increasingly they are also negotiated through narratives that emphasize skill and professionalism, like in other professional games and sports (e.g. Cushion & Jones 2006; Howe 2001; Radburn & Horsley 2011, 31).

Gambling is a fascinating cultural phenomenon, but as an object of research it is difficult to release it from the problem-oriented premise from which most scholars set out. Johan Huizinga, for example, the respected “father of games studies”, declared that gambling games add “nothing to life or the mind” (Huizinga 1949, 48; see also Radburn & Horsley 2011, 30–36). In a similar vein, Roger Caillois (1961, 147) a famous sociologist studying play and games, referred to gamblers as “nonchalant addicts” and “eternal children” (see also Binde 2009, 47). My study is a small contribution that sought to explore the relatively uncharted area of the *everyday* of poker. As the role of the internet in entertainment, work and study continues to grow, and as gambling seems to remain a constant element of Finnish (and global) culture (see e.g. O’Leary & Carroll 2013; Matilainen & Raento 2014, 432), there is no reason why cultural scholars should not be encouraged to counterbalance the problem-oriented, social scientific research approach to gambling with an exploration of how games focusing on risk and money reflect the wider configurations of value and morals and new forms of being social. I am not suggesting that scholars should encourage gambling, but what I am saying is that the addicted, profligate gambler, who represents just a small minority, is not the only angle to take.

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## NOTES

- 1 I define a professional as a player whose livelihood depends mostly on playing online poker. A semi-professional is a player who has regular income from another source but plays poker for money to obtain significant extra income. Finally, an amateur is a player who plays mostly just for fun, less actively than the other two categories, and without any significant financial goal. At the same time I acknowledge, in line with Bjerg (2011, 112), that these categories are blurred.
- 2 All of the participants have been given pseudonyms, the perceived need for which varied from one interviewee to another. Some of the participants were not at all interested in whether their personal data was made public or not but others were more worried about what would happen to them if, for example, their colleagues at work found out that they earned money by playing poker.
- 3 A regular ring game (also called “cash game”) would have 6-9 seats at a table. A player could choose from different tables with different bet sizes. When a player entered a table, he/she would do a “buy-in”, which means that he/she bought him/herself a “stack” of “chips”, or tokens equivalent to the given sum of money. The buy-in for a table would be, for example, 2–5 dollars, meaning that one could buy him/herself a stack worth 2 to 5 dollars and use it for betting in the game.
- 4 The reason Kimmo said “used to” is because he had just broken up with his girlfriend.
- 5 A Sit & Go tournament is normally played by 4 to 9 people. It starts when the last seat of the table is taken by a player, and goes on until one player has won all the others’ gaming chips. A Sit & Go tournament rarely takes more than an hour to finish, so it is relatively fast compared to multi-table tournaments that can often go on for up to 6-8 hours.
- 6 Although the interview is available publicly, I am not disclosing information about the interview as it would reveal Kimmo’s identity. This interview took place a few months before our interview.
- 7 The concepts of “live” poker and “virtual” poker are interestingly indicative of the cultural hegemony of the former over the latter. As both forms equally happen in real time they could both be called “live” poker, but still live poker is seen as the “authentic” source of poker, which internet poker imitates. (Jouhki 2010, 62.)
- 8 Tilting is poker jargon and means losing control and playing poorly because of feeling upset about an unexpected loss (see e.g. Radburn & Horsley 2011, 36–37). Some (e.g. Bjerg’s 2011, 134) call it, jokingly, a “mini psychosis”.

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## KEYWORDS

Culture, gambling, gaming, internet, online poker