

# **NEGOTIATING REALITY THROUGH PLAY – THE CASE OF ROMANIAN POKER PLAYERS**

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## **Abstract**

Rather than seeing play and gambling as insulated activities, this thesis engages with gambling trajectories, namely the process of becoming a professional poker player, as well as the way in which players negotiate different orders of reality in light of the games they play. Through the conceptual lenses of play and game as a continuum of modes of experience and attention - where play is interactional and collective, and game is probabilistic - I analyze different gambling endeavors that players recount, highlighting the importance of beginnings in articulating gambler experience. Against the background of previous gambles, players either become totally engrossed in one reality (as with roulette playing), or recuperate their sense of worth, by managing both chance and money (as with poker). By introducing the notion of “community of practice,” (Jean Lave) I show how acquiring knowledge through solitary study, collaborative learning and legitimate peripheral participation are essential in becoming a professional poker player.

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## Introduction

I met Teo one Friday afternoon; nicely dressed and groomed, he seemed more like a shy teenager than a poker champion. He talked to me about his gambling career, and one hour into the interview he revealed, as if it was no big deal, that he had just “hit” a big tournament, winning 115,000 Euros. He was 21. He was shocked. The first thing he did was to call his mom.

Some time after, I met George, who spoke passionately about poker, casually inserting into his story his poker performances – he was ranked number one in the world for Internet sit’n’go tournaments, amassing a bankroll that amazed poker sites and which eventually led to his hiring him as a coach for other players. From all my respondents, he was the most confident that, even though poker might look like a game of chance, on the long term, the better, that is the most skillful player wins.

Hector was patient and considerate in explaining me about his trajectory, his very well organized poker schedule as well as his dedication to the game. From his way of talking and explaining, I could tell he’s a pro, but not too different from my other informants. Later, when I googled him, I saw that he was among the best Romanian poker players.

Five years ago, nobody would have given these young men a chance. Seeing them today as poker champions is easy. There are “Teo” stories and “George” stories. Hector is a constant interviewee speaking on behalf of the Romanian poker scene. The interviews and other media appearances are framed to suggest, shyly and modestly, that poker is an honorable endeavor. The so-called “professional poker playing” has emerged in Romania rapidly twisting its way through a crowd of small

gambling venues populated by anxious aspirants who scrupulously gamble small amounts of money, on one hand, and a few large, quite inaccessible casinos, with their careless spendthrifts, always in for action and excitement on the other.

This thesis deals with the period between professional poker player as an unlikely possibility and its acknowledgement as a feasible alternative. By means of direct observation and life-story interviews, I document the path towards becoming a professional poker player. Much like one player graphically suggests, it is a story of linear evolution, “from monkey to gambler.” Nevertheless, as promising this metaphor might be, by taking into consideration players’ biographies, I would rather hint towards another type of evolutionism that would do justice for the way they frame their stories. One more appropriate metaphor would be that of punctuated equilibrium (Eldredge and Gould 1972), since these stories are more of leaps and bounds, intense moments of revelation shortly followed by atonement and self-irony.

In a somewhat similar way, my story with gambling as an object of inquiry is one of naïve beginnings. The tricky lore that gambling adduces has preoccupied me since I was working on my bachelor thesis. I assumed that gamblers were somewhat ignorant: if they would know the mathematical underpinnings of their gambling endeavor, they would not gamble any longer. The first empirical effort I undertook was to find out whether those people actually knew the probabilities involved in gambling or whether they calculated their risks when betting. I realized that the only one being naïve was I when I baffled upon the paradox that all my respondents were well aware of the mathematics, and some even quite proficient. Why were they still betting? They could not beat the casino! As anyone newly introduced to sociology, I recklessly threw these gamblers to the shackles of modernity (Giddens 1990) or risk society (Beck 1992; Luhmann 1993), that is, risky subjects that I apprehended only in

connection to statistical reasoning and probabilities (Hacking 1975; 1990). In the quest for structural determinants of social life, I missed the people from the forest of institutions and categories. There was something more that I could not grasp and of which I was not entirely aware.

Later, though I left my gamblers open to doubt, I stuck to the casino setting where some of them appeared to me more disciplined, or maybe more convenient to study in an orderly manner: poker players. My puzzle at that time was that all of them, whether university graduates, engineers, or business owners would define and present themselves as “professional poker players” rather than indicating their root occupations. This, coupled with my then interest in the sociology of work led me to look at poker as a profession, judiciously crafted and to be later justified by players themselves.

My thesis builds upon my previous research on the way Romanian poker players describe themselves as professionals. I focused on deconstructing the concept of “professional poker player” as imported from the field into distinct characteristics entrenched in the game, the setting and the players. Looking into the way life and poker playing were discursively related, I regarded poker as a structuring matrix that organized the way players direct their biographies and self presentations towards legitimizing poker as a profession. My entire perspective on gambling was construed in the sometimes disputed duality gambling has: badly connoted by outsiders, yet extremely valued by insiders. While I inquired into the way theoreticians actively work at separating play and gambling from the realms of everyday experience, I have neglected to take into consideration precisely the play element that is shaped and shapes at the same time the cultural assumptions gambling actuates. In this study I aim towards addressing this gap, trying to approximate a relationship between

gambling and playing.

My research has a specific focus, namely to trace the steps in becoming a poker player, from the first experiences with gambling to the decision to play for a living, to describe the learning experience as well as the way players project their futures. The first chapter offers a literature review organized on three levels: at first, departing from the works Jonah Huizinga (1938) and Roger Caillois (1961), I discuss the relationship between play and culture where both are apprehended as philosophical objects of inquiry. If the two authors offer laudatory accounts of play, they dismiss gambling as the decadent counterpoint. Secondly, I discuss scholars who, by introducing the largely ignored players into the picture see play and game as a continuum of modes of experience and attention to the game. Thirdly, I go back to the issue of play, gambling, and culture, but through the conceptual apparatus of anthropology by bringing to fore authors who argue that play and gambling are rightful co-authors to culture, rather than activities insulated in a world of their own. Chapters 2 through 4 focus on the way I illustrate play and games in relation with players' gambling trajectories. Hence, the second chapter represents the first step in my analysis and elucidates on the way I interpret players, the settings, as well as the way players morally entangle these settings. The offsets of players' gambling "careers" are addressed in the third chapter, where I content that the way players organize the story of their becoming in poker is not a linear, gradual development (as they sometimes attempt to convey), but a succession of beginnings, articulated through moments of intense revelation. The last chapter tries to situate players in a "community of practice," (Lave 1991) where poker knowledge is socially situated and mutually constituted at the intersection between players, gambling, and their world.

## **I. Literature review and conceptual framing**

The homology between play and gambling is one undeservingly ignored – both play and gambling are fraught with uncertainty, ambiguity, ambivalence, are sometimes manifestations of a dangerous eternal childhood and at the same time bring to fore orders of existence immensely separated from the realm of everyday life. Constantly playing with boundaries, both depict the fascination with the unknown and nondescript as well as the ambiguity of representation. Although they share the same formal characteristics, gambling entices its peculiar relation to money as the first distinguishing constituent. Nevertheless, to say that gamblers play for money is merely the beginning of a strenuous road towards its analysis (see also Ortner 1999). While the relationship between gambling and money has animated many theoretical accounts that have deemed gambling as irrational, the connection between play and gambling is one settled before inception: there is one dominant interpretation that assumes that though gamblers may play, their play is futile and inconsequential, insulated from the realms of everyday life.

As my thesis aims towards addressing this gap and at the same time installing the play element in gambling as legitimate and worthy of attention, I deal with authors who start their analyses from the same puzzle, namely defining the relationship between play and culture. Although coming from different disciplines<sup>1</sup> or reading this relationship through different conceptual lenses, their answer is always the same: play is important, if not crucial, for culture.

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<sup>1</sup> My literature review of play is not extensive as I am more interested in the relationship between play, gambling, and culture. Granted, I remark that play does not lend itself easy to social research. The literature on play is diverse, extensive, and disputed by a wide range of disciplines, thus making it hard to define; consequently, most attempts at formulating a viable conceptualization of play end up in comprising a census of attributes: play (along with game) is crucial in the socialization process (Mead 1934), an infantile state of development (Piaget 1951), distinct from ordinary life by means of space and time (Huizinga 1938), but at the same time paradoxical in the simultaneity of play and non-play (Bateson 1972), pervasive and elusive of categorization (Turner 1983), or positive by being the sum of two negatives (Schechner 1993). Play is ambiguous and diverse (Sutton-Smith 1997).

### **Insulated play**

The indispensable reference Johan Huizinga (1938) approaches play as the very foundation of culture and the stepping-stone of civilization.<sup>2</sup> Working towards a morphology of play, he conceptualizes it as a manifest structure that infuses all spheres of cultural expression (Anchor 1978: 63, 78). He proves himself both wary and exuberant regarding the generative powers of play. Play is a voluntary, gratuitous activity, unfolding within the limits of time and space, and consolidating rules that organize a spirit that is otherwise dangerous. It is accompanied by “a feeling of tension, joy, and consciousness that is different from ordinary life.” (Huizinga 1938: 28) More than an analytical tool, the separation between ordinary life and play is also a safeguard against the contaminative powers of play.

This cautionary tale of the decadence of play signals the breakdown of the distinction between play and seriousness. Play is safe only against the background of its established boundaries and only when distinctions such as play/serious activity become unassailable oppositions. Huizinga’s entire argument is built on the dual opposition of play and serious activity, which permits a reading of play as being favorable only when it fuels, sustains, and enables seriousness. Furthermore, not every type of play is auspicious, as he makes (yet) another distinction between true and false play, allocating gambling to the latter category. Far less permissive, gambling is not true play, only a sterile perversion insofar as it produces nothing to life and mind (1938: 48). Since play demands knowledge, skill, courage, and strength, qualities which gambling (supposedly) does not support, games of chance would be inscribed in what Brian Sutton-Smith names the rhetoric of fate, in which gambling

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<sup>2</sup> Although not the first one approaching society and culture *sub specie ludi*, Huizinga provided a comprehensive definition of the notion of play and put it high on the social sciences research agenda. See the important reviews by Anchor 2001 and Minnema 2008.

can be apprehended "not only as models of the irrevocability of fate but also as fate fantasied." (Sutton-Smith 1997: 53)

Another feature that distinguishes play from false play is that true play is pure. Professional players (such as sportsmen and gamblers) ruin the spirit of true play, by attacking on its spontaneity and carelessness (Huizinga 1938: 199). Furthermore, the porousness of its boundaries imports distinctions and categories within play – good players and bad players. Huizinga's theoretical arsenal of contrasting oppositions meddles when speaking of professional players. Facets of the same coin, play and seriousness are positive only when they do not corrupt each other. In this vein, professional players (be them bridge or poker players) ruin the game by bringing an over-serious disposition into it, turning play into a "deadly earnest business" (199) out of which society gains nothing: it does not enrich the soul and takes virtue out of the game (*idem*).

I argue that the boundaries imposed upon play combined with the lack of interference between the world of play and the world of serious activity levy play and games *as sui generis* undertakings, moralizing at the same time the tendencies to view play and games as integral parts of culture. Moreover, seeing no cultural stakes or implications in gambling limits gambling students (especially those of rationalist or positivist inclinations) to reproduce these arguments in their work, stressing on the problematic nature of gambling. Although the two approaches I discuss could not be any more different (Huizinga pleads for a ludic ontology of culture while the rationalist and positivist separate the gambler from her culture, sending her on a quest towards maximizing self-interest), their premises and sometimes the outcomes in what regards gambling studies are one and the same: gambling is corrupt, inauthentic, wasteful, thus irrational.

While positivistic approaches aim at measuring gambling incidence and raising awareness (Reith 2007a: 12), utilitarian approaches carry out this task by means of cost-benefit analysis. First of all, most economists ground their explanation on a model of rational economic action in which individuals are perceived as investors and make competent decisions as a result of calculations of the benefits and risks of various forms of gambling (also in Walker *et al* 2008). Gambling represents an economic behavior with “negative expected value”, and this is considered to be “antithetical to the self-interest of rational consumers.” (Reith 2007b: 43) Secondly, they apprehend gambling behavior as being irrational as the sole purpose of businesses and free markets is to generate profit. However, the fact that gambling does not produce profit in itself, but deals with a redistribution of wealth among the players (in games that suppose interaction among players) or among the players and the house (the casino) has caused much debate in the economic field (see for example Rosett 1965; Rubner 1966; Cowan 1969; Eadington 1988; Cosgrave and Klassen 2001; Marfels 2001). If gamblers are stripped of their playful dimension and granted with discipline, or at least accuracy in choosing the best bets and strategies, they become orderly subjects for social scientists. Nevertheless, this is not entirely possible. Cognitive research comes to stage only to irreparably damage the grounds on which rational choice and rational action stand. People do not necessarily calculate in terms of mathematical rigor; instead, they use approximations, estimate or supply themselves with artificial mechanisms aimed at reducing uncertainty, such as the appeal to good luck and higher instances of authority (Delfabbro 2004). Isolating the formal features of the game and its stakes from the players’ actions as well as from the local social, cultural and historical contexts leads inevitably to a rupture between practice and rational choice (Joas 1996: 146; Malaby 2003: 10).

This rupture between play, gambling, and culture is addressed by Roger Caillois who critically builds upon Huizinga's efforts to theorize play by arguing that Huizinga's definition(s) of play are too broad and too narrow at the same time (1961: 4). As his predecessor, Caillois endows the game with a starting as well as an ending point, a fixed duration, but includes in his analysis the element of competition, as well as the conduction between play and money. Acknowledging the role of gambling for the economic and cultural life of societies, Caillois disputes Huizinga's belief that in games (and gambling) no material interests are involved. Nevertheless, the two thinkers as similar in the materialistic approach to games, where, they consider that even though property is exchanged, no goods are produced (124).

### **Games as processual undertakings**

In Caillois' now illustrious typology of games (*alea*, *agon*, *mimicry*, and *illinx*), poker would be categorized as a combination of *agon* and *alea*, competition and chance, where players relentlessly subsume to a logic of skill and luck. Assuming Caillois's categories, poker is a competitive endeavor, where equality among players is artificially created, a game nonetheless that requires attention, training, discipline, perseverance (132-3) and which is built upon a desire to prove superiority claims: may the best player win. As for *alea*, as much as professional players deny, the element of chance is still an integral element over which they have no control (133).

Caillois further complicates his analysis by placing each form of play along a continuum from *paidia* to *ludus*; *paidia* corresponds to unstructured, spontaneous activities (play as it was read by Huizinga), while *ludus* represents the institutionalization of play. If the former equates with freedom, creativity, improvisation, the latter involves calculation and contrivance (144). This dichotomous approach to players' attitudinal stances resonates with the play-game argument in

George Herbert Mead's (1934) understanding of socialization. Mead's approach to socialization, where play and game represent developmental stages in establishing the framework of the self articulates a lacuna in Caillois's theoretical scaffolding, namely that play and games represent social, collective, and interactional undertakings. Though Mead's approach to play and game is challenging to use other than as a metaphor to the formation of the self, his insights are useful in rearticulating Caillois's argument.

Using the game of baseball as stage for illustrating theoretical claims, Mead distinguishes two stages in the formation of the self: during the play stage, the child takes the role of the other, and mimes both (or all) parts of the interaction; hence he organizes the attitudes of others toward himself and toward one another (158). In the game stage, the child is able to organize the attitude of the generalized other (or social group) to which he belongs (ibid.). In the process of becoming a self, the child assumes the logic of the game, where he, together with his team concert their actions and efforts towards a definite goal to be obtained and all actions are related to each other so that they do not conflict or contradict each other (159). In this key, the game metaphor evocatively exemplifies a gradual sequencing of socialization, where the child goes from taking the role of others in play to internalizing the rules and institutions of the community he belongs to. Caillois does not continue his argument and leaves unresolved the matter of becoming, or how *paidia* turns into *ludus*; moreover, by leaving the interactional factors out of his analysis turns the game into a solitary, individual calculation.

Howard S. Becker (1953) also gives a comprehensive account of becoming, but does not limit its scope to early socialization. When speaking of marihuana users, the American sociologist argues that the presence of this habit consists of a sequence

of social experiences during which a person learns to engage in a specific activity. Thus, taste becomes a socially constituted affair, where the user goes through several definitions and redefinitions of his situation as one out of which pleasure can be extracted. For him, communicative acts are key in acquiring a liking for marijuana - through communicative acts, others reveal and present the user with new interpretations of events, thus broadening his conceptual organization of the world (242).<sup>3</sup> Translating Becker's argument into the fields of play and gambling is especially informative for conceptualizing the transformations incurred upon people turned to play - namely, the road to becoming a player. Equipped with this view of social action - from play to game, from individual to user - as ongoing transformations marks play as being more than a static appraisal or instantiation of culture, but a process that engages individuals, transforming them at the same time.

### **Play and gambling and co-authors to culture**

The question to be addressed at this point is whether play constitutes its own universe or whether play activities are manifestations of culture. Caillois's analysis is astute in the sense that for him, certain forms of play become enmeshed in culture and play becomes a reflection of life (Caillois 1961; Fontana 1978). Rather than seeing play, games, and gambling as separate domains of a "bricolaged" ontology, the French sociologist predicates upon their centrality for culture, by actually epitomizing facts of culture. Poker playing shares two categories, both *alea* and *agon*, that direct to its embeddedness in orderly societies, where chance and competition rationalize the

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<sup>3</sup> By adopting Jean Lave's (1991) critique of Becker as well as her approach to learning, I dismiss the intentionality of the process of learning that Becker makes salient. In other words, Becker provides an insightful analysis of becoming, but overemphasizes the role of teachers in the accumulation of knowledge. I will return to this point later in my analysis.

world by introducing a notion of stable, regulated universe and social life becomes a combination of the two opposing, yet complementary elements (Fontana 1978: 215).

On the same par, but in a vehement deposition against materialistic accounts of culture, Thomas Malaby (2009) seeks to install play and games as legitimate domains of anthropology.<sup>4</sup> For him, the indeterminacy of the outcomes of games<sup>5</sup> is mimetic of the open-endedness of everyday life, thus connecting games, in a contrived manner, to other domains of experience, assimilating them to human practice and social process, where games should be acknowledged as a “particular mode of experience, a dispositional stance towards the indeterminate.” (207-8)

Clifford Geertz’s (1973) insights on gambling on cockfights are particularly valuable for regarding play and its gambling companion as integral facts of culture (if not rightful coauthors to it). The methodological cunning of “Deep Play” reveals that a society’s culture can be captured (in a restricted manner) in the way individuals gamble; thus, for the Balinese, gambling on cockfights is mimetic of wider social structures, such as kin relations that are revealed, enforced, and sometimes insulted when betting. Looking at culture as text, Geertz manages to read the way gambling is inscribed in the local practices: myths are founded on the centrality of cockfights (as that of *Sudra* and *Siva*), village practices and rituals involve cockfights, representing the first instance of a blood sacrifice, but also, for a “professional outsider” such as the anthropologist, gambling in cockfights gives a visual representation of the way the village is organized.

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<sup>4</sup> Malaby argues due to the lack of institutional support (no section in American Anthropological Association), play and games have been dismissed from anthropological inquiry. This is not the sole instance where the absence of play and games has been noted, see for example Grathoff 1970; Minnema 2008.

<sup>5</sup> A similar type of argumentation is forwarded by Caillois 1961; Goffman 1967; Desjarlais 2011.

Introducing Jeremy Bentham's concept of "deep play", Geertz complicates the analysis. In an academic feud with the utilitarian approaches that were gaining prominence in the 1960s, Geertz discusses the utilitarian conception of rationality. Deep play, as Bentham discusses in his "Theory of Legislation," refers to situations where the stakes are so high that it is irrational for individuals to engage in. What Bentham does is that he introduces morality in this exchange, deeming deep play as immoral and therefore to be prevented legally. Yet, as Geertz explains, people engage nonetheless. The Balinese see in such play not only the material benefits (or utility) that one might gain, but also a symbol of moral import, since what is at stake in deep plays is not solely money, but esteem, honor, dignity, respect and status (*idem*). In other words, play is deep in the sense that is "problematic and consequential" (Goffman, 1967) making reality up for grabs as well as the affirmation, reaffirmation or insulting of one's place in the social order.

With this conceptualization of deep play, Geertz goes further into the textuality of the Balinese culture to affirm that the cock is a metaphor that accompanies everyday imagery to depict disputes, political competitions, trials, but also to show a momentarily instantiation of animality and fascination with "the power of the darkness." (424-425) In this focused gathering, individuals play out status, conceptions of masculinity, competition, and rivalry but at the same time surface those of equality, family, and kin. The cultural preoccupations of the Balinese are assembled in cockfights that are organized and held even when they are illegal. In this sense it becomes obvious to state that gambling is so embedded in the Balinese culture and everyday life that it transcends the regulations and enforcements imposed by the law, but also the norms imposed by those vested with symbolic power – the elites.

Sherry Ortner's (1999) work on "serious games" in relation to mountaineering is particularly valuable to expand Geertz's notion of deep play. Ortner understands serious games not only in the nature of the game *per se*, but also in the "complex fabric of imagines, practices, conceptions and actions in which history constructs both people and the games they play, and in which people make history by enacting, reproducing, and transforming those games." (1999:23-4) In this way, games are challengingly divorced from life; instead, they are part and parcel of everyday experience not only by being intensely social but also through the way they mold culture. Simultaneously, these games and gambling endeavors reflect culture from within, by being deeply engrained in local orders. For the Balinese, gambling in cockfights depicts one instance of co-produced order, and at the same time exemplifies the ruptures between a utilitarian measure of norm and practice.

Hugh Raffles (2010) deals with a corresponding case of gambling as co-authorship to culture. Raffles sets out to investigate the interaction between humans and insects in China, and, when he inquires into the nature of cricket fighting, a world of gambling unfolds. Deep play imbues the intricacies of cricket fighting, where the stakes are not only material ones but also relate to traditional culture, authenticity, and nostalgia. Conducting his research in Quibao, Raffles talks about how the Chinese make efforts to revive cricket fighting, but at the same time to promote it as distinct from gambling, reminding people that these fights have a deep historical and cultural presence (2010: 77).

The *double entendre* of gambling on crickets in China tells the story of socialist modernity: if on one hand, cricket fights are expressions of feudal decadence and counterpoints to socialist modernity, they tell at the same time a cultural tale of crickets as "historical agents of the first degree"; at the same time, both seductive and

cautionary, it warned against the compulsive effects of gambling (79-80). The intellectual elites also have a say in trying to divorce gambling from cricket fighting and, at the same time, promoting it as high culture: “Cricket fighting is like the Beijing opera; it’s the quintessence of our culture [...] the most typically oriental element of our culture.” (105) Nevertheless, at the time of the three-week cricket festival in Quibao nostalgia, heritage, and gambling are melted into a singular form and people join together to display their crickets, sell them, watch them fight, and bet on them.

A most visible case of tension is exemplified in Jessica Cattelino’s ethnography of gambling ownership in Indian reservations (2008). Playing on the duality of perspective, Cattelino tells a story of contrasts and ambivalence. If the dominant population in the United States depicts tribal casinos as the pitfalls of capitalism, an emic perspective will tell a different story of tribal sovereignty. If American will talk about the loss of traditional values, the Native Americans will talk about the efforts to preserve traditional values under new economic conditions, using gambling as a way to finance cultural production. Contrary to the utilitarian inspired academic debates about the value of gambling, the Indians serve as evidence to prove that, even though indirectly, gambling specifies for the Seminole the very conditions of possibility for a culture to affirm itself. The anthropologist insightfully shows how tribal gaming is a trope for greed, loss of indigenous cultural authenticity, cultural differences and economic power in American culture.

Gambling combusts, contradicting local understandings of rationality and norm, and also challenging the established order. Geertz’s cocks and Raffles’ crickets resemble through the depth of the play that they adduce. The controversies as well as the ambivalent nature of these gambling endeavors reflect writ small that they are part

of a larger cultural whole, defined in close relationship to the contours and tensions of a given society at a given time (Kavanagh 2005: 3-4).

## II. Research and findings

### Method

I conducted interviews with eight professional poker players in 2010-2011 and another five interviews with less experienced players, but regular casino goers in April 2012.<sup>6</sup> The players I interviewed are men of quite similar ages (from 21 to 28) who moved to Bucharest from other cities of Romania (Galati, Suceava, Onesti) in order to pursue their higher education studies. All interviews were designed as life-stories, as I asked my respondents to go through different stages of their lives in relation to their gambling trajectories: from the first games they played for money (such as *five-card draw poker* with friends, or shooting craps in their neighborhoods), to the first time they entered the casino, the games that allured them to the point when they turned to poker (live and online). Some turned for good and saw in poker the better alternative for a “traditional” career, some were already poker champions, and some were still torn between *serious* poker and other casino games.

My initial connection to the poker world was a former colleague whose gambling career I closely followed and documented for three years. Always up for a challenge, he brags of having beginner’s luck in most gambling games and that’s most likely because he played and had a penchant for them all. His gambling career took off when he left for Bucharest to the university – since then, he played video slots, and video poker, roulette, Blackjack, and a symphony of other casino games, until he came to define himself as a poker player. His biography as a poker player had

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<sup>6</sup> All interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours and were conducted in informal settings.

its ups and downs, but in spite of swings and variations, he affirms with certainty that he plays poker for a living. In the semiotics of the gamble, uncertainty and play, poker knowledge came to inform his view of everyday life, turning poker playing into a lens at the aid of which he disposed of, confirmed, and revalued his practical knowledge of the world.

Subsequently, I met a few other poker players and I came to look at this social world through the tensions, controversies, and contradictions of gambling practices. I followed some players as they played poker in live casinos, and some who later turned to online poker, while others were still having quandaries with poker playing either explaining it to their families and even to themselves.<sup>7</sup> From afar, I saw the game of poker being transformed through experience and expertise, but I also saw the people I talked to being transformed by the game; I caught a glimpse into how professionals speak of the game, but also learnt how to make the difference between a beginner, a fish, and a regular.

Even though I do not know them from the same sources, it is very interesting that players know about each other – either in person, or as a reference to a particular level of skillfulness. This has given me the first intuition that I am not dealing with people that simply play poker, engaged in solitary play, but I am knocking at the gates of a social world, whose organization is the result various group formations developed along the lines of skill, common interests, or forms of poker played.

This has proved to be a fruitful methodological tool upon which I have stumbled serendipitously, as I did not intend (nor expect) for all my respondents to know each other. Consequently, my knowledge about players was broadened as I got

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<sup>7</sup> One of the interviewees terms this better: “I was borderline between playing poker seriously and asking myself if what I did was serious.”

to know them outside the interview situation, not only through their self-presentations, but also through the way they were referenced, talk about, and sometimes glorified. I was not the only one following the players' trajectories, but players themselves were on each other's whereabouts. I heard stories about players who travel together to popular poker sites such as San Remo, Monte Carlo, Nova Gorica, Vienna, and Berlin, and some even share apartments rented especially for playing poker online. A few of the people I interviewed have become acknowledged as being among the best in their field: awarded in European tournaments (such EPT 2012), the number one player in varieties of internet tournaments (Sit'n'Go), or among the ten most proficient Romanian players. As a consequence, they turned into media subjects that are extensively covered.

Although interviewees come from different towns and have different backgrounds, there is one feature that unites all the interviewees: their stories are remarkably similar. Not only do they all have histories with gambling prior to poker (an inevitable consequence of the research design) but in all stories I could see how they gradually turned from pure chance to skill, in a continuum from *play* to *game*, from improvisation, ruse and luck to a more mathematical frame, where winning was the result of calculation, analysis of hands, and game experience.<sup>8</sup> This allowed me to delve deeper into the problematic of the poker game, by inquiring into the qualitative aspects of poker, as well as to place center stage the process by which somebody becomes a poker player.

### **Settings**

I witnessed the emergence of the social world of professional poker players, the

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<sup>8</sup> It is interesting how one player has an "evolutionist" perspective of his gambling career, deprecating at the same time his beginnings with poker: "*the evolution of the monkey: from monkey to gambler*" (Edi, 24, March 2011, 2 hours); I will return to this point later.

economic boom that surrounded casinos in Romania (2008-2009) and afterwards its relative demise. Gambling and poker playing have become vehicles for the transformations incurred in Romania after 1989. Communist memorabilia in the form of blocs of flats and identical grey neighborhoods gained piercing colors, so as to welcome the explosion of small businesses after the Revolution, such as supermarkets, small shops, and exchange houses, drugstores and fast-food joints. While many scholars took into consideration the changing social scenery, it was Vinea (2004) who came closest to observing the ever-increasing number of gambling houses in Bucharest. While insightfully observing the clustering of pawnshops, she was one step away from seeing the casinos and gambling venues next to which they were positioned. At the time she counts a large number of pawnshops, there were approximately 400 gambling houses in Bucharest, and subsequently, not only the industry, but gamblers themselves have had their biographies on an ascending plane. Casinos have changed the face of the city as casino patrons found themselves hopeful for a gambling industry that would gross profits over 22 million euros and that would turn the prophecy self-fulfilling: “no street without a gambling hall.” (Roibu 2009)

Gambling scholarly research, abundant in the United States and Western Europe, stands as evidence of the infatuation people have with games of chance, as well as the dual nature of their endeavor: praised and promoted on one hand, condemned and banned, on the other (Jack, 2006). Despite its germaneness for gambling research, Eastern Europe remains a still undisputed terrain for gambling scholars. In the particular case of Romania, the blatant fascination with chance and easy money instantiated in gambling is conspicuous, yet virtually unexplored. The exception is given by Katherine Verdery’s (1995) study of the pyramidal scheme Caritas. Though not explicitly a game of chance, moneywise, Caritas was a different

name for a national gamble. Under the auspices of “free money”, the scheme erupted in 1990 and eventually deflated in 1994, enchanting Romanians to the point of envisaging its founder as a philanthropist and an honest “man of God” (639). Verdery brilliantly argues the conduction between hope, trust and money as well as the national trance Caritas occasioned. Even if pyramidal schemes do not quite fall under the category of gambling a connection can be made. On the one hand, participants themselves used the vocabulary of gambling for their transactions (633, n. 44; 636, n.57). On the other, this can be better understood in retrospect: with Caritas, Romanians were playing a game of chance as they took a risk for what was later proved to be a chance to win.

Verdery interprets Caritas as announcing the transition from socialism by introducing Romanians to the intricacies of finance capitalism, where money can proliferate with no visible effort (636). Moreover, the game brought hope and instilled an image of Western cornucopia, the promised land of “unlimited riches, consumption, and abundance,” (645), which worked side by side with God – if God was more of a long-term commitment, Caritas gave back in three months.

The link to the communist period is brought by the novelty of this enterprise. As Verdery reports, prior to 1989, the available alternatives for accumulating money were scarce, ranging from state lotteries to mutual-aid funds; after 1989, the economic possibilities caught Romanians by surprise. Caritas (and by extension casinos and other gambling endeavors) change frames by introducing people to large sums of money, enabling them at the same time to manipulate and plan unimaginable sums (624). At the same time, through its transparency, the game introduced people with viable alternatives to contest what they considered a dreaded past. The folk explanations of the inner workings of this pyramidal scheme oscillated between

seeing it as a laundromat for illicit earnings (and so enforcing the view of the Romanian economic elite as corrupted) and seeing the founder as godsend.

As hopeful as it had been painted, Caritas inevitably failed, only to be replaced shortly after by a wide range of games of chance. State Lottery and bingo games turned to national television, and at the same time promoted themselves in the field of leisure and consumption, prospective moments of personal fulfillment. Casinos mushroomed all over Bucharest, turning the city into the Eastern Las Vegas. In this key, it is of no wonder that opinion polls gather 63% of Romanians as declaring gambling as their ultimate chance at getting rich (Insomar 2000).

The people I have interviewed are more experienced with this later development of the Romanian gambling industry. Their beginnings with poker are very much tied to the opening of the first venue exclusively for poker in Bucharest (*Unirea Poker Club* in 2009), where players could practice the game for relatively small stakes. This setting represented a point of meeting and intersection, not only in its spatial representation, but also as indicative of the level of skillfulness of each player. *Unirea Poker Club* was more than a popular gambling site, but a setting from which professionals emerge, are made and enacted, and where they return in case of failure. At the same time, it was a point of validation, where gamblers “realized” that they are good, ordinary, and bad poker players.

*Unirea Poker Club* was closed in 2010 coinciding with the opening of *G Poker*, which for many appeared to be a functionally similar substitute setting. Both sites host identical small stakes games. From my perspective, this new casino represented an ideal site of studying both gambling (as a probabilistic endeavor) and playing (as a form of interaction with men and machines). Differently from most casinos in Bucharest (such as *Platinum Casino*, *Novotel*, or *Queen*) which host high

stakes poker games and have an usual entrance fee of 250 Euros, G Poker has an entrance fee that can go as low as the equivalent of 15 Euros<sup>9</sup>, thus enabling play to various types of gamblers (either beginners, in the process of learning, or pros) for relatively low stakes.

However, talking to my interviewees revealed that *G Poker* was not the ideal arena for studying professional players. Most interlocutors often referred to this site as “*the aquarium*” (Mihai, 22), a jokingly made metaphor to indicate the level of skillfulness of its players – mostly inexperienced, or *fish*. This furthermore suggests the interesting juxtaposition between the players’ biographies and the way gambling has developed in Romania: the period when *Unirea Poker Club* functioned was the stage when people were actually introduced to playing in an institutional setting (the casino) and it was there where poker as a profession, substantiated. As players became more experienced, they went to other casinos to play higher stakes and sometimes chose to play online, thus leaving this poker venue to oblivion. One player (Dan, 23) recalls that when *Unirea Poker Club* opened, it was a profitable business for its patrons, the cash games were always full; afterwards “*the craze evanesced, as well as the craziness and everybody’s enthusiasm,*” the place lost its appeal and subsequently closed down.

However, players do not refer only to these two places as tied to their poker beginnings. The social world that play sustains is larger, more complex and not exclusively tied to that of the casino. Play arrogates spaces for itself as players paint the contours of what I have chosen to classify as three settings that pertain to a larger ecology of play – underground, casino, and online poker. Each of these places has a different practice of play that is narratively connected by players themselves to a

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<sup>9</sup> Players there report not to gamble more than the equivalent of 50 Euros in one sitting.

particular time of their upbringing as players. At the same time, each poker site has the character of what Erving Goffman calls “social occasion”, which provides players with an entire repertoire of framings bounded in time and space, as well as with the structuring context, appropriate pattern of conduct to be followed and a distinctive ethos (Goffman 1963: 18-19).

### **Moral ecologies**

Before *Unirea Poker Club* opened, the people I interviewed report to playing for money in student dorms, in organized home games, in bars after closing hours, as well as in illegal venues. One player remembers seeing one such venue on the TV news as the police busted them: “*I also saw my friend there under a table, they [the police] didn’t do anything to the players, only to the owner, charged him with tax evasion, he didn’t give out receipts, no casino norms, nothing.*” (Mihai, 22) These places are imbricated with the frames through which players look at them – dangerous, fraught with suspicion and uncertainty – but also the frames they use to look at the people they played with “*those were degenerate gamblers, totally in for the game*” (Dan, 23). At the same time, it provides in retrospect a sense of their imagined self, where secrecy and action (Goffman 1967) are keys to understanding their status. This connection to their past legitimates players as risky subjects *outside* of the poker table.

Poker playing in institutionalized settings is intimately connected with learning and improvement. A perfect articulation of Huizinga’s play agenda (1938), casinos encapsulate in a contrived manner the separation between everyday life and the world of play. Gerda Reith describes the casinos as the ideal type of gambling experience, creating within a micro-cosmos of gambling activity (Reith 1999: 111). Casinos are instances of an “architecture of play,” containers where play is sold and

controlled at the same time (Franinovic 2011). Players account for each casino in accordance to a particular gambling experience as well as in relation to stakes gambled, a level of skillfulness and a particular time of their trajectories. In this way, the casino is rewritten outside geographical conventions, but from within, thus turning into “lived space [...] heterogeneous and relative to the experience of the individual.” (Reith 1999: 139)

*Unirea Poker Club* appears idealized in players’ narratives, as it stands for the good old times, when the game was more about playing and winning money. One player (Edi, 25) recalls his enchantment with the site as well as with the game “*I was thrilled at the beginning, players were pretty weak and I won the first days, it was pretty easy to win, I mean for that level.*” Similarly, another player retraces his beginnings in relation with the now surprising paradox of winning: “*it’s really cool when you look back and you realize what a bad player you were, yet you still won. After winning a couple of times, I went all the time, I won all the time, and there were a lot of money at the beginning in Unirea.*” (Dan, 23) Playing on the duality of the game, another gambler links as well Unirea exclusively with weak players and good games: “*there were many fish there, weak players who don’t know the game that well, but have the money, afford to lose it and lose it easily.*” (Sorin, 24)

The nostalgia players have with the play element of the game further supports the argument that play and game are two separate entities, as they signify two different experiential modes and two different modes of attention to the game that at the same time change through practice, that have the potential to “generate new meanings as well as to reconfigure the game itself.” (Malaby 2007: 102). Once a new

level achieved, marked by a new bankroll,<sup>10</sup> players are faced with several alternatives: either to play in higher stakes casinos in Romania, to travel to European cities in the search for “good games,” or most of the times turn to online poker.

Casinos, however, are judged in a similar framework of suspicion. Individual loss is pinned on the intersection between technology and national identity – either electronic poker tables are customized so that casino owners accumulate even higher gains, or interested in not losing clients, owners close their eyes to collusion<sup>11</sup>: “*You’re playing with these people and then you realize that out of the ten people at the poker table, six are friends and they clean you out.*” (Mihai, 22) Players speculate on the nature of each casino enterprise in relation to the way money is circulated between them and the casino patrons: “*we had all these stories at the poker tables, we thought money was being laundered there.*” (Dan, 23) When talking about casinos ownership, players feel they are the victims of a large con, either due to the large share profits patrons get from their gaming, or by evaluating their own chances against the casino: “*you try to work against the casino, but it’s virtually impossible, they are trained for all sorts of situations.*” (Andrei, 24) In each of these instances, the association with the broader national picture is visible and routinized that it is sometimes used as a signifier for all the things that go bad: “*we’re in Romania, we mustn’t dream of correctitude.*” (Mihai, 22)

The moral ambivalence related to the Romanian gambling industry coupled with the incredulity of achieving a bankroll less prone to variations leads players either to travel searching for “good games,” but most often than not, to play poker online. Players recognize online poker as the purest form of game, which eliminates

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<sup>10</sup> Amount of special money to be managed for poker.

<sup>11</sup> Form of cheating that involves two or more players playing as a team at the same poker table and sharing their gains.

the national factor as well as all other subjectivities one might bring to the game: “*the online game is more about mathematics and accounting than actually the game [...] we’ve tried to learn other games too [varieties of poker], to perfect this one [holdem poker].*” (Andrei, 24)

With each new site comes a new practice of play, as well as a reconfiguration of the game. In this respect, by playing on the learning aspect of their endeavors as well as on each level and bankroll accrued, players fashion new and new beginnings, transforming not only the game itself, but also themselves into perpetual beginners. The next part of my paper deals with beginnings and how they frame gambling trajectories.

### **III. Beginnings**

The metaphor of the phoenix rising from its own ashes is a recursive analogy implicit in all of the stories I have collected. In many ways, interviewees recollect several beginnings – the beginnings with gambling at large, the beginnings of the roulette phase, the beginnings with poker – each form of play building up the frame of the following. Each period is marked through the contestation of the previous one, through moments of intense revelation when players realize how “stupid,” “diseased,” or “degenerate” they were *at their beginnings*. With each new beginning, players define and conceptually refine play in accordance with the previous phase of their gambling trajectory.

Looking at beginnings involves looking at the plans, initiatives and courses of action that they present. People are formed within the storyline of these beginnings (Smith 2001). This part of my thesis deals with gambling beginnings and how players fashion their experience in light of the games they play, fashioning at the same time

new and new beginnings. Understanding games as eminently processual, I analyze the relationship between players, the game they play, and the place they allot money and chance in their endeavors. Each beginning can be understood only in its historicity, and against the background of previous gambling undertakings. Thus, money changes its significance from *raison d'être* (in players' early beginnings), to game equipment (in the roulette phase) and only later, through poker, does it recover its worth. At the same time, through play, players are in an ongoing, interpretative process of defining themselves as well as sketching the contours of both the world of play and everyday reality.

### **Petty gambling**

The people I interviewed have a long-standing engagement with gambling. Their trajectories lead them through a variety of games and gambling endeavors, which draw nearly to their transition to adulthood. Gambling careers start around the age of 15 (for some even earlier), when prospective players conduct their first experiments with money, chance, and risk, which for many serve as friendship filters, sifting the adventurers from the ordinary. One player describes petty gambling as a screen through which he selects the most apt of his classmates as friends: *"it was during high school, all the people were new for me, I've created new entourages, and the gamblers in my class... we found ourselves easily, some were more willing to gamble, so we started to play."* (Edi, 25) Another one recounts playing craps in his neighborhood, but for him age indexes his winnings and renders them meaningful: *"I would win three quarters of the minimum wage at that time; I think it was ok for that age."* (Andrei, 24) For most players, gambling represents their first occasion of winning money, which is not perceived as luck, but as an indirect signifier of skill and

other personal abilities. Gambling and winning are passports to independence, be it merely financial and short-termed.

This stage is marked by a synonymous relationship between games of chance and contests. In relation to the amount of determinism that these two endeavors entail, they are intensely different: while in games of chance players cannot do anything with regard to the outcome, contests stand out as requiring “intensive and sustained exercising of relevant capacities” (Goffman 1967: 153). Nevertheless, players confuse between the two, treating them as equal representatives in displaying character and gaining prestige in one’s peer group. These timid, yet fateful beginnings are further sustained in the play-game continuum as pure play, both as a characteristic of the games they play, but more importantly as the players’ attitude towards the game itself.

Money needed to sustain petty gambling falls under the category of pocket money. Young gamblers bet small amounts that they receive from their parents for day-to-day expenses: “*I only had money to go out, I asked my dad to give me money to go out, he gave me some, but not too much, I never had my own money until I began to win from poker.*” (Dan, 23) Money in this instance is the *raison d’être* of each play, but at the same, along with petty trade and other small, sometimes illicit, transactions they make (players report ordering goods from the Internet or selling phones), it symbolically cuts the financial strings between themselves and their families. The play at this stage is covert and, much like the winnings, sporadic.

### **Roulette**

Even before the age of consent (18 years old), the legal age required to enter casinos, most players recount a particular relationship to the roulette tables. Roulette is all about chance – by no means can players devise strategies that would influence the outcomes, nor can they, based on their prior knowledge, make any impression on

where the ball will fall (Oldman 1974; Reith 1999; Turner 2008; Bjerg 2009; Young 2010). But, on the same par with Dostoevsky's Alexis who rationalizes his fascination with roulette by granting it with the power to enable his entrance into aristocracy (Dostoevsky 1866/1981), players justify their obsession by appealing to alternative, yet simultaneous, folk theories of chance: either they devise algorithms that explain *post factum* the outcomes of the roulette, or, most often, rely on gut and feeling: "we all feel it, if you play and don't feel the roulette, you're good for nothing. It's like you're playing randomly." (Andrei, 24) The speculative reasoning that players acknowledge renders an otherwise nonsensical endeavor into a meaningful one, conceding at the same time two different, yet connected realities – the reality of the game and that of the everyday life. If the pseudo-scientific explanations account for the everyday realm and are imported into the game so as to make clear a secular existence and order outside the casino, they are complemented by more experiential theories. The latter prey on the local and situational character of their endeavor as well as for the contestation of the doctrine of necessity that ties gamblers to the electronic tables.

More significant than inferring the results, players talk about their beginnings with roulette as collective endeavors, where, among financial stakes, notions such as belonging and group identity were on the table. With every spin of the roulette and each decision to go together, a sense of a "we rationale" (Goffman, 1961: 18) is created and sustained: "*we started with this virus, there were two or three of us, early in the morning, in front of our school. What to do? Math or Mercur [Casino]? And most of the time was spent there, at that casino, playing roulette.*" (Teo, 21) While winnings and losing are underrated in players' narratives, it become poignant that going and being together makes roulette meaningful for the gambler. Intense and

destabilizing as playing is in this stage, it creates the feeling of “being apart together,” that extends far beyond the bounded situation. (Huizinga, 1938: 31) The transgression of norms (such as skipping school, or entering casinos before the legal age), coupled with the exceptionality of each visit to the casino make up a particular type of sociality for which the roulette is both a tool and a medium. “*You are never alone in the casino*” (Mihai, 22) argues another player so as to point to the thickness of the interaction as well as to the potentiality of the casino to contain its own electronically mediated sociability.

Another player recounts how, from all the games he played, he remained “*faithful to the roulette*” (Andrei, 24), while another speaks of how and why winning got him engrossed in this game: “*like any terrible, stupid kid with some money, I went to the roulette. Some older friends of mine got me to go with them, and, beginner’s luck, I won. I was a crazy kid at that time, I liked designer clothes, Nike, Adidas, I had to have them.*” (Mihai, 22) The magic that lures players in, as well as the inadvertent initial winnings, mark the temporality of their transactions, promoting for players an ethic of the present where immediate gains and instant gratification are key.

The roulette phase further marks players’ transition to adulthood. Once they finish high school, they move to Bucharest to continue their studies. Stories refer less to the very experience of moving from town to city and from their parents’ house to a student campus, but to the money students receive from home – more and all at once. As one player nicely states, money comes “*with a certain direction*” – usually rent, utilities, and life expenditures – and that makes it liable to diversion. Gamblers see themselves as having licenses to print money, the stakes increase and indebtedness is only a matter of time. One player thinks back to his roulette period through the fuzziness and ambiguity of indebtedness:

In Bucharest I had more money, and there were others who had money. I learnt the concept of borrowing, which I didn't have when I was living in Galati. It was a weird time, I did some really weird things in my roulette period. I depended very much... my life spun around roulette, around debts, around people I met at the roulette tables. My life and my way of thinking were on a whole new track. (Edi, 25)

Most players recall this period through the lies they elaborated in order to cloak their gambling activities and loss. Caught in vicious circles, most players gamble, lose, borrow, spend, and lose again. As with petty gambling, the secretive component of their risky endeavors was ever present, entailing both practices of concealing (especially when it comes to borrowing money) and revealing (when lies amass and they lose credibility). Retrospective self presentations deems players as strategic illusionists, financially lucrative arrangements being more important than the relationships with significant others: *"my parents were divorced, so they didn't keep score of who's giving me money [...] I showed my dad the same pair of jeans three times and I told him I got three pairs."* (Mihai, 22)

The way players handle money falls under the ever-present motif of "losing value," a pejoratively phrase used to denote mismanagement and lack of control. When the meanings assigned by each player to his roulette phase are matters of social semiotics, it becomes manifest that the past is evaluated in light of their present; thus, the measure of money is not a utilitarian one, but one reflexively recounted and morally loaded in light of their present improvement. Hence, players deprecate their roulette phase, either explicitly calling it a disease and some seeking help, at the advice of others: *"thinking it's a disease, my mom sent me to the psychologist, a doctor for mental problems,"* (Andrei 24), blaming it on age: *"I was a crazy kid."* (Mihai, 22) or reading it in an evolutionist twist: *"it's my evolution, from monkey to gambler."* (Edi, 25) Either way, the condemnation is not only a sign of a deficient

relationship with money, but at the same time a sign of their decisional potentialities in their daily encounters with chance. The way players morally evaluate their beginnings stands as an exercise in self-reflexivity in an “ongoing life project of ego negotiation and personality formation” (Potter 2003: 193), as well as an anachronistic valuation of the past, always in connection to how their game has improved.

Losing control over resources imported in the world of play deem these chancy beginnings as pure play – gratuitous and for its own sake. Acknowledging the world of play as being separated from everyday life further nuances the analysis. If one admits this separation s/he would inevitably fall in the trap of essentialism and even formalism (for elaborate critiques of this divide see Malaby 2007; 2009). But once the principle of conversion between the world of play and everyday life is money, which loses its exchange value, and consequently its calculability, it becomes mere “game equipment” (Goffman 1961). The rules of irrelevance that players adhere to while playing roulette implies, for the duration of the play, disclaiming any value one might hold for the equipment employed (19). The only meaning money has in this first instance is to prolong the playtime and keep the action going.

However, seeing play and gambling as processual undertakings unspells gambling students from the straightjackets of essentialism and formalism. Following players’ trajectories as well as the way they define and draw the contours of their worlds, I have tried to observe how the process of becoming a player unfolds. I suggest that poker playing can be only understood against the background of players’ gambling history, specifically petty gambling and roulette. In the case I study, the beginnings with gambling entail players’ immersion in a world of pure play that invokes a notion of chance akin to Geertz’s (1973) fashioning of the Balinese cockfight, that is, an ontological statement, a grand existential and cosmological

commentary. Gamblers at this point place themselves on a plane of being that eludes mathematical dictates and expresses their problematic relationship to the world (Kavanagh 2005). Counterintuitive as it might seem, poker appears retrospectively as bringing back the players to the world, recovering the faulty relationship they have with money.

### **Roulette endings, poker beginnings**

The shift between roulette and poker is not distinctly formulated, as the two games merge one into the other, sharing not only the same ecology, but also the same practice of play. One player admits to winning money from poker and gambling it away on roulette and slot machines: *“I wanted to see how fate spins on the roulette wheel, so I gambled the money I earned at poker at the roulette tables, and that was it... The money I worked for at poker in three, four hours I would lose at the roulette in 20 minutes.”* (Mihai, 22) This quote nevertheless captures the essence of poker beginnings by revealing more than the flow of action and money within the casino and among different games: it unveils the different layers of meaning that gambling actuates as well as the entire cosmology of their endeavors. Even though two different games are played, players share the same attitudinal stance towards indeterminacy as well as the same cognitive style. In other words, the two games are played as if they were the same.

While gamblers recollect playing poker in different underground and (sometimes) borderline legal venues, it is *Unirea Poker Club* that gathers all prospective players, fueling at the same time a sense of community. The fliers, billboards, and posters made to announce and advertise this poker site are simultaneous with intense televised campaigns about online poker and many soon-to-be-players go to check it out. Numerous gamblers are surprised at the encounter with

the stability of incomes and of the size of the bankroll they amass in a relatively short period of time. Winnings set the frame and storyline for the way players incorporate poker into their daily lives: *“if you win at the beginning, you incite yourself and you want to learn; if you lose, you say it’s a game of chance and give up.”* (Dan, 23) Learning becomes motive plea and marks yet another beginning.

With no exception, players recollect a distinct moment of revelation, when they realize the precarious state of their roulette phase in relation to the possibilities poker presents. Players begin to take the game seriously: *“at the beginnings, we were just hanging out, afterwards it turned into <I’m going to play as good as I can and make some money out of it>.”* (Dan, 23) In other words, players realize that money can be made out of playing poker-as-poker and that they are no longer the self-inflicted subjects of experiments with the game of roulette. This moment can be termed as what addiction studies refer to as “epistemological shift”, a moment of epiphany in which the addict re-evaluates her life and the place of drugs in it, as well as adopting a new relationship to the world, with themselves and especially with the future (Reith 1999: 108).<sup>12</sup> The epistemological shift can be further interpreted in phenomenological key as the transition point from one “province of meaning” to another. Each province of meaning is real as long as it remains undisturbed; when one reality is no longer meaningful for the player, it is replaced by another whose cognitive style is more appropriate for the player (Schutz and Luckman 1973: 22-5). The transition however between the two provinces that roulette and poker arrogate, is

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<sup>12</sup> This moment appears to be especially significant as it brings into discussion an everyday commonsensical notion of addiction that players refer to when talking about their gambling beginnings. The self-deprecation to the point of medicalization offers players a justification as well as a repertoire of motives that compensates for their admitted lack of knowledge as well as for the momentarily suspension of reality. Nevertheless, as a point of departure in research, the issue of addiction is a baggage of morally loaded and preconceived notions that need to be debunked instead of taken for granted (see Becker 1963; Goffman 1963).

done by means of a leap, through which the player exchanges one style of lived experience for another. Each leap is accompanied by the experience of a shock that “bursts the limits of that which is momentarily real,” and through which, at the same time players bestow the accent of reality upon another more plausible province (25).

In this vein, the contours of gambling are drawn in contrast with those of everyday life, but once players realize that the game is to be taken seriously, the two provinces (that of the game and the wider-reality of everyday life) complement each other. Their definition of the self in this instance is one marked by recovering the material worth of money inside and outside the game. One player recalls: “*I began to see the value money has and when I’d lose one or two million lei, I’d be really upset, I’d leave, it wasn’t the same as with roulette, when I didn’t want to leave, who knows, maybe it’ll give me a number,*” (Mihai, 22) fostering at the same time a new attitudinal stance towards the game, where, through poker, players express a work ethic. Evaluated against the background of roulette playing, poker beginnings involve a redefinition of play, yet this form of play is more connected to the wider-reality by the fact that players import into the game not only money, but also personal skills combined with notions which they hold as being valued: discipline, schedule, and bankroll.

Poker unfolds a whole new spectrum of possibilities and courses of action: “*when I reached the conclusion that you can make serious money out of poker, I wanted to improve my game, to see how I can make more money, what I could learn extra, what other things would make me become a better player, I started to know the concept, to believe in the concept of poker player, until then there were no poker players, I just went and played poker.*” (Edi, 25) Gamblers no longer see themselves as waiting passively for a favorable result to come, but as agentive actors in making

the result favorable. Winning agency back, however, represents for players a career-long project that actualizes with each new level and bankroll they accumulate. As stakes increase, players deal with a new form of play, and fashion at the same time a new beginning.

Unirea Poker Club is a concrete and glass embodiment of the initial phase of their poker career as well as the first re-definition of play, formulated upon the frame of roulette playing. As poker presents itself as long-term alternative, the temporality of the game suffers reconfigurations. If the former sustains a continuous present, poker playing directs players towards a statistical long-term: *“On the long term the difference is played upon how good a player is, if you play a great volume of hands, chance doesn’t intervene so much as if you play a smaller one. And, as long as you manage yourself well, like in any business, you have real chances to win.”* (Andrei, 24)

The newly acquired grammar and logic of poker playing echoes in the way players statistically project their futures, as well as in the way they validate skill by equating it with initial winnings. This first instance of winning represents the empirical confirmation of one’s sense of worth – bad, ordinary, or good player.

The next part of my thesis tries to situate poker players in a community of practice as well as to reveal the many aspects that poker learning entails.

#### **IV Learning and improvement**

##### **Poker scene as a community of practice**

Knowing the rules of the game is merely the first step in becoming a poker player. The “high stakes” are ventured becoming part of the poker community. This part of my thesis deals with the “ideologies of learning” (Jones 2011) that players circulate

and sometimes adopt as philosophies of life. I argue that both casinos and online poker sustain a community of practice, where learning is not only the result of solitary investment of time and study or merely the result of collaborations between players. Rather, poker knowledge is socially situated and mutually constituted at the intersection between players, their activity, and their world.

Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) developed the notion of “communities of practice” so as to emancipate learning from its *sui generis* character and promote it in relation to participation in the culturally bound settings of everyday life. Subsequently, Lave (1991) advances this notion by applying it to the workplace, school, the apprenticeship in midwifery, and even Alcoholics Anonymous, and thus theorizes learning as “a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice” (65) along the lines of which people become members of a sustained community of practice. Debunking the conventional idea that no intentional practice makes learning impossible, the author points to the resources other than teaching through which novices acquire knowledge and skill, namely exposure, peripheral participation, and practice (71).

In an insightful reconfiguration of learning, Lave develops a vocabulary of newcomers and old-timers and explains that through broad exposure to ongoing practice and peripheral activities, newcomers become familiar with the task, vocabulary, and organizing principles of the community (71). The way knowledge is constituted as well as the way players talk about learning deems the world of poker as a community of practice. This is particularly visible when talking to less experienced players, who appropriate the vocabulary sometimes even before the norms are properly internalized. Regardless of the bankroll or the amount of actual knowledge

players possess, they always try to make of poker something they are (or would be) experts at: *“at one point I had a strategy, you can’t make money out of poker all at once [...] professional poker players are very calculated [...] if you want to make a living out of poker you have to gamble away a lot of your time, to be very calculated.”* (Mihai, 22) Rather than exposing them as frauds, Lave’s elegant denomination of “newcomer” unveils not only that less proficient gamblers are at the beginning of their “career,” but also that they are in the process of becoming members of this community of practice.

There are many ways in which gamblers learn to play poker. Believing that I want to learn poker, one player brought me a flash drive with almost fifty books and articles that he used to teach himself the game. The books I skimmed through entailed deconstructing the game into specific components, such as probability calculus and teaching players the value each hand had, while others were superstars’ biographies and recollections of memorable hands. There are hundreds (if not thousands) of similar articles and books, as well as Internet forums that players can access in order to perfect their game. Yet this is only one instance of what is a very practical form of knowledge.

Concurrently with the leap and reconfiguration of the cognitive style of roulette playing, players assume a definition of the self in accordance with the more compatible principles of the world of poker. The ethos that animates poker culture consists of values that are circulated among players, but also between the world of play and that of everyday reality. Against the background of their gambling history, poker players recover notions such as worth, work, leisure, order, and uncertainty, which gain consistency as philosophies of live. Becoming a poker player entails

mastery over the game of poker, knowledge and skill, but most importantly, is about swift circulation and conversion between the worlds of play and of everyday life.

Players define “professionals” as people who make a living out of poker; yet, the work ethics that characterizes professionals is more complicated to be reduced only to making money out of poker – it is about the way money is made. Along with the time and study players devote to the game, learning essentially entails the transformation of the self, where acquiring notions such as discipline, bankroll, and commitment is of paramount importance. Money comes hand in hand with a slow yet steady advancement of the bankroll along with personal skill. Thus, one player talks about the schedule he had in a particular period of dedication to the game: “*I had a schedule, I’d read two hours, one hours watch game videos, one hour I’d review my previous session and four to six hours I’d play, as long as I could, as I was in good shape to play.*” (Dan, 23) Other player recalls following the experience of professional players that would explain their game, as well as their decisions, moments he describes as one of revelation: “*I realized that there is a kind of mathematics behind this game, which is not easy, but not entirely difficult.*” (Hector, 28) The diffuse apprenticeship facilitated by Internet learning involves exposure to what Graham M. Jones terms as “systematic imitation of exemplary routines” (2011: 70), where novices learn by mimesis the successful techniques, and also how to apply them.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mastery over the learning resources implied at the same time mastery over the means to access these resources. All in their twenties, players are used to new technologies and have reached adulthood synchronously with the advent of the Internet and the integration of personal computers in Romanian everyday life. In one of the stories this technological gap appears most visible especially in relation to the nature of the money made online: “*I told my dad that I won this online poker tournament and he said <Take that money out, don’t tell me you can make many on the internet until you see it in your own hands>.*” (Dan, 23)

Nevertheless, there is more to learning than the self-contained dimension of individual study. While brushing up on his learning experience, one player became aware that mastering the game is more than a solitary engagement with poker, but an intensely collective one: *“I thought that I could learn it by myself. I had to be autodidact. Only later did I realize that it matters to play as a team, to have an entourage, this is how you develop your game, you learn a lot from the discussions that you have, which, at one point, become routine.”* (Edi, 25) The collaborative feature of learning meets the impossibility of a player’s encountering of an infinite number of card combinations and game situations. Yet, if petty gambling and roulette are covert practices, the poker scene unfolds through social accomplishments. Each memorable hand, each good decision is stocked in a common depository of knowledge that players internalize and appeal to when confronted with a particular game situation. With the short timeframe in which a hand is played, good players have to access their stock of knowledge comprised out of the books they read, the game situations they experienced, as well as situations encountered by their peers. At the same time, they estimate their present hand according to its probabilistic strength, evaluating at the same time the other participants in the game, their position at the table and the stakes played. The corpus of cautionary tales as well as of memorable hands stand as evidence that the game is not an object that one can acquire, nor does it come as a set of instructions, but that poker knowledge is multifaceted and chiefly practical.

There is no successful way to learn poker; poker knowledge is collaborative but foremost is about practice, as it is always challenged by new game situations and hands played. Along with these two instances of learning –solitary and collaborative – there is a third component of learning, what Lave (1991) discusses as legitimate

peripheral participation. *“You’re at the poker table and you fight over strategy, someone is angry with you because you played poorly and explains you how you should have betted. Other people hear and they form these ad-hoc ideas about the game, about how it should be played.”* (Dan, 23) Co-participation in the form of access to ongoing practice is facilitated by equal admittance to poker tables of both novices and more experienced players. Hence, through exposure to practice as well as opportunities to improvise the practice, players develop a changing understanding of what playing means.

Nevertheless, players pride themselves with the ability to handle novel situations and speak of themselves through the lenses of game creativity and personal wit: *“there is stuff you can’t learn, you have to have talent and experience, and always improvise on the spot, come up with something new with each moment. You can’t learn this, as much as you want. You have to be smart. I didn’t meet successful players that are stupid.”* (George, 23) Therefore, the difference between a good and a bad player stands in his ability to converse between the two orders of reality, importing, translating, and sometimes infusing each realm with knowledge and insight from the other.

### **Approximating a game theory**

The pathway to becoming a professional poker player unfolds through a constant negotiation of the play element in poker. Players continually approximate a rationalized approach to the game by assuming a game theory logic to their gambling undertakings. Nevertheless, if the probabilistic touch is a constant companion, at different levels of skill and bankroll, players bring to the fore ruse, improvisation, social knowledge, or psychological understanding as being of paramount importance. Thus, one of the first things players turn into credo is the difference between poker

and other casino games. Sometimes vehemently, players argue that unlike roulette or slot machines, poker minimizes the amount of luck, by replacing it with elements of competition, skill, and knowledge. “*I like to think of myself as a casino for all the fish*” answers one player when I inquire into the differences between a good and weak player, making it more even more poignant that even when the same hand is played, there are two different games at the same table.

The negation of play is not intrinsic to players only. The game as a metaphor has enjoyed a busy life in theoretical accounts that have as well eliminated play as a mode of experience constitutive of the game. The allure in using game metaphors stands in their plausibility: games themselves create orderly micro-cosmoses regulated by the rules and roles created in and by the game. Game theorists keep this game-reality analogy up to the point where the game ends and the winners and losers are settled. Poker, they argue, represents "an inaccurate representation of real-life contests," (Horner and Sahuguet 2002: 3) its particularity standing in its payoff structure: all bets go into a pot, which is taken by the winner, “one player's gain is the other's loss.” (2) The most current analogy is developed in the academic field by game theory. Although scholars argue that there is no logical connection between games and game theory, in devising models, they appeal to games for their ability to model real life situations (Swedberg 2001; Coleman 1968); Games are seen, on one hand, as clarifying the relationship between rules and constraints and, on the other hand, as potential indicators for phenomena in social systems (DiCicco-Bloom and Gibson 2010).

The central figure in devising the game theory approach is the mathematician and chess-master Emanuel Lasker, who sees in chess the perfect combination of game, mathematics, and social interaction (Leonard 2010: 16). Departing from chess,

Lasker devises a model for real-life situations by putting *homo economicus* central stage. However, as the mathematician himself proves both in his writing and his way of playing, relying solely on tactics eventually weakens the imagination and does not guarantee success. Contrary to accounts that deem chess as entailing the least amount of contingency (see for example Bjerg 2009), in chess, as well as in poker, the outcome is uncertain and part of the intrigue of watching or playing this game stands in the layers of indeterminacy, chance, and playfulness that the game entails (Desjarlais 2011: 13-5). In other words, the game theory assumptions are prone to bankruptcy due to the impossibility to model a purely *homo economicus* without the playfulness inherent in any game.

The game theory approach is a translation of the way players rationalize the game and is most visible when discussing online poker, which for them represents the purest form of game. I contend that the purity of its games is related to the postulate that players venture, namely that *“on the long term, the better player always wins.”* The statistical projection of the future is twofold ideated: on one hand, it represents the way the player imagines his bankroll; on the other hand, it is tied to the way he imagines himself as an individual. The probability law of great numbers, where individual events are coupled in an aggregate form epitomizes for players a new form of meaning making: *“if you play a lot on the Internet, you have a greater experience because you encounter more situations, online you get to see more hands than you would see at live poker, where a hand is played in three to five minutes. On the internet, you play a hand in thirty seconds.”* (George, 23)

Nevertheless, living for the long term is a project that is never truly achieved. Rendering the game as a purely mathematical endeavor unveils the unfeasibility of this job. Most players who take on online poker as a way of life talk more about the

stress and anguish they accumulate, rather than their actual game: “*I was playing many tables at once, I was on the auto-pilot mode, I was playing without thinking, playing 14-16 tables at once doesn’t give you a lot of time to think [...] it was wearing me down, I was alone and had bouts of depression.*” (Dan, 23) This goes to prove that it is impossible to divorce game from play, nor to jettison relentlessly in the hands of pure play.

Always a bridesmaid never a bride, *ludus* (as Caillois forwards) as a form of play that entails rationality, calculus, and game experience is never achieved in practice, as it cannot be separated from play, improvisation and creativity. What for social theorists is still a matter of talk and debate represents for poker players an everyday reality as well as an ongoing struggle in conciliating between two different ways of classifying reality.

### **Concluding remarks**

I have discussed in this thesis Romanian professional poker players in relationship to their gambling trajectories. These stories show a gradual movement from play, something intense, interactional, and foremost based on creativity and improvisation, to game, as a probabilistic enterprise. At the same time, I propose an exercise in reading the way gamblers make sense, negotiate, and sometimes conceptually define reality through the games they play. Their trajectories, where play and game are apprehended as part of an agency-driven process, echo those of professionalization, where players not only provide themselves with more compatible definitions of their situations, but produce and circulate new notions person and value, work and leisure, order, uncertainty, risk and hope. These players go to show that through

professionalization, poker playing can be a way of life, even if one increasingly intense, accelerated and demanding.

I have dealt with players who are related by being of similar ages, and who belong, more or less, to the same generation. Their development as players comes hand in hand with the way the Romanian gambling industry has developed, but at the same time with the transportation of poker from the casino to the Internet. In this time, poker has turned from an exotic to an accessible alternative. Learning and becoming member of a poker community is not restricted to a few chosen ones. Quite the contrary, especially with the advent of online poker as well as with enabling access to smaller stakes games, prospective players can try their game, or at least hope to have a shot at becoming professional.

So... what's next? Many players see online poker as a controllable form of game and thus, through comparison with live poker, a more reliable source of profit. Nevertheless, the two forms of play are intensely different, online poker being far more aggressive and fast-paced. Many turn to online poker, and some even combine the two. The constant shift from one form of play to another, coupled with the infusion of online players in casino poker changes a game that players argue is getting more and more competitive. As players argue, on the long term, a professional player wins. Yet, the long term is no longer approximated statistically (where individual events are not signs of success or failure, but part of an aggregate), but is limited according to personal levels of stress endurance. Most players do not even see themselves as playing for more than five to ten years.

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