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♦   Introduction

Over the last decade, an almost explosive growth in the popularity of poker has taken place. Rough estimates say there are 140–80 million regular players worldwide, and the turnover of major poker sites on the Internet is counted in billions of dollars.[1] What used to be a typically American game has now become a genuinely globalized phenomenon. Obviously, the growing popularity of poker is closely connected with the development and the spread of the Internet. Yet technological innovations and clever marketing provide only part of the explanation for the "poker boom."

This book is written on the assumption that the sudden popularity of poker signifies a rich cultural resonance in the game. When we look at a piece of art, read a piece of literature, watch a film, or listen to a piece of music, it is commonplace to think of them as cultural expressions of the society and historical context in which they are created. Art, literature, film, and music are readily recognized as mediums of the Zeitgeist. Poker and other gambling games are rarely thought of in the same fashion. At best, they are considered meaningless entertainment, at worst self-destructive vices.

The idea of this book is to treat poker as a cultural expression in line with art, literature, film, and so on. When so many people find poker interesting, it is because the game has an eminent capacity to capture a set of existential conditions of life in contemporary society and offer them to the players in a form that allows them to explore, challenge, and play with these conditions. Furthermore, not only is the cultural resonance of poker

manifested quantitatively in the great amount of people playing the game, but the quality of individual players' engagement is often very intense. It is not uncommon for players to devote significant amounts of time, money, and mental energy to the game. The significant cultural resonance of poker makes it a rich phenomenon in terms of meaning and therefore an intriguing object of cultural analysis.

In his seminal work *Man, Play and Games*, Roger Caillois formulates a program for a sociology of games that could also serve as a program for the analysis of poker in this book:

> It is not absurd to try diagnosing a civilization in terms of the games that are especially popular there. In fact, if games are cultural factors and images, it follows that to a certain degree a civilization and its content may be characterized by its games. They necessarily reflect its culture pattern and provide useful indications as to the preferences, weakness, and strength of a given society at a particular stage of its evolution.[2]

The reason that poker, as well as other gambling games, generally receives less attention than art, literature, films, and so on as culture-bearing is not simply a matter of forgetfulness. Jackson Lears, author of *Something for Nothing*, has noted: "Debate about gambling is never just about gambling: it is about different ways of being in the world."[3] Historically, the attitudes in society toward gambling seem to have been ambivalent for as long as these games have existed.[4] On the one hand, gambling has been condemned as a vice or later on as a pathology; on the other hand, gambling games have been tolerated and sometimes even appropriated as sources of public revenue. This ambivalent attitude is very much true today in relation to poker. Poker seems to have an eminent capacity for producing a certain kind of *Unbehagen* in the collective body of society.

As a cultural expression, poker is not exactly an embellishment of society. This is incisively captured in Walther Matthau's famous quip on poker: "The game exemplifies the worst aspects of capitalism that have made our country so great."[5] As we are going to see throughout this book, poker simulates core features of contemporary capitalism and displays these in a very pure form. Poker functions as a parody of capitalism.

As we know from impersonations of famous and powerful people, the exaggeration of distinct features of a person has the effect of "desublimating" the image of this person. For someone who wishes to maintain a certain image as being endowed with certain sublime or otherwise impeccable

qualities, parody can be very discontenting. There is an element of truth in any good parody, not in the shape of accurate representation but in the effects on the original image of the object of parody. As a parody of capitalism, poker produces certain truths about the economic organization of contemporary society. Maybe this is why the game provokes *Unbehagen* in society, and maybe this is why there seems to be a reluctance to grant poker the status of a culture-bearing phenomenon.

When we experience times of great fluctuation in the general economy, capitalism is sometimes compared to a gambling game. The metaphor of "casino capitalism" is frequently used as a denigrative designation of the state of the economy. For instance, Nobel Peace Prize laureate Muhammad Yunus comments on the recent financial crisis: "Today's capitalism has degenerated into a casino. The financial markets are propelled by greed. Speculation has reached catastrophic proportions."[6] Although the intentions behind the statement are probably both fair and well-meaning in terms of the analysis of capitalism, the implied notion of what happens in a casino is at best inaccurate and at worst misleading.

This book proposes a corrective to the concept of casino capitalism. First, it makes a clear distinction between poker, on the one hand, and roulette, craps, and other gambling games of pure chance, on the other. Second, it demonstrates that contemporary financial capitalism does indeed resemble a poker game, whereas it has little to do with other casino games. Third, and perhaps more importantly, the book raises the question of whether the equation of capitalism and poker is really a denigration of the former or perhaps rather a denigration of the latter. As Yunus's statement exemplifies, it is common to think of gambling in general and poker in particular as degenerate forms of economic transaction. The concept of casino capitalism is meant to designate a perverted form of capitalism.

However, once we move past the immediate moral depreciation of poker and venture into a thorough analysis of the game, arguably we find a more democratic, honest, just, and pure system for the distribution of value than in actually existing capitalist society. In a 1974 *Playboy* article, G. Barry Golson says about poker:

> The game is as perfect a microcosm as we have of the way a free-enterprise system is supposed to work, except that the rich don't necessarily get richer. Brass balls will do. [In a game of poker] a grocery clerk can humiliate an oil tycoon through sheer bravado—the object being, without exception, to bankrupt the bastard across the table.[7]

A symptom of the reluctance to give poker the status of a culture-bearing expression is that the vast majority of research-based texts on gambling are analyses of different aspects of problem gambling. Although problem gambling is certainly a serious issue with tragic consequences for those individuals suffering from the disorder, the focus on the detrimental aspects of gambling often stands in the way of exploring and understanding its wider cultural meaning. Fortunately, in recent years there has been a growing interest in the cultural significance of gambling, and a number of brilliant books on the subject have been published.[8] As none of these works deals with poker specifically, many of the analyses of this book venture into virgin territory. Actually, David Hayano's seminal study of Gardena poker players in *Poker Faces: The Life and Work of Professional Card Players* from 1982 stands out as the only serious academic work on poker within the field of anthropology, sociology, and philosophy.[9] As a result, the analyses of this book have found great inspiration and support in the rich body of nonacademic literature on poker that has been growing steadily with the increased popularity of the game.[10]

As poker is a fairly virginal phenomenon in terms of academic analysis, it still has not found its proper place in a specific field of research. Within the framework of the book, this indeterminacy constitutes both a difficulty and a liberty. Instead of fixing poker within a particular field of theories and methods, the analyses of the book move into various disciplinary fields: philosophy, sociology, psychology, economy, and history. The purpose of the study is to intervene in several fields of knowledge at the same time and, by doing so, force these fields to open up toward each other. These fields of knowledge are cultural studies of gambling, popular literature on poker and poker strategy, gambling studies of compulsive gambling, and social theory on contemporary capitalism. The ambition of this multidisciplinary approach is also to invite a wide range of readers with different interests to explore different topics in the book.

The book is divided into four parts, each subdivided into two or three chapters. Part 1 is a philosophical analysis of poker. In chapter 1, poker is positioned in relation to other games with regards to the ontological structure of the game. Slavoj Žižek's distinction between three different ontological orders, the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary, is presented. This triad provides the basic analytical framework for much of the thinking about poker in the book. Chapter 2 continues along the same lines. Using a single hand played by poker professional, Gus Hansen, as an example, it demonstrates how a particular variant of poker, Texas Hold 'Em, is actually

played, and the basics of strategic reasoning in poker are introduced. Chapter 3 concludes the philosophical analysis of Texas Hold 'Em by using Žižek to unfold the challenges of poker strategy.

Part 2 analyzes poker empirically as an economic system for the circulation and distribution of money. In this part, the analytical focus is gradually shifted from the game of poker to the poker players. Using data from an online game provider, chapter 4 maps the relative proportions of different categories of winning and losing players. In chapter 5, data on different styles of playing are included, and five classes of players are identified in a statistical latent class analysis.

In part 3, the analytical focus is also on the players, and different forms of subjectivity in poker are investigated. Based on qualitative interviews, chapter 6 investigates the particular skills required to succeed as a professional poker player. In chapter 7, three ideal typical approaches to poker are developed, using again Slavoj Žižek's distinction between the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. The three orders correspond to the three types: Sucker, Grinder, and Player. Chapter 8 looks into problem gambling in poker. Using qualitative interview data, the chapter develops a map of four different types of problem gamblers in poker.

Part 4 investigates the cultural meaning of poker and the relation between poker and capitalism. Chapter 9 takes the analysis to a very general level by inquiring into the relationship between game and society; it proceeds by presenting Jean Baudrillard's definition of game as "parodic simulacrum" as a way of conceptualizing this relationship. In chapter 10, this concept is applied to a historical analysis, demonstrating the parallel development of poker and capitalism. I argue that the evolution and succession of different forms of poker, Flat poker, Draw poker, Stud poker, and Texas Hold 'Em, correspond to the evolution and succession of different paradigms of capitalism. Chapter 11 demonstrates how the circulation and distribution of value in No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em simulate the circulation of value in postindustrial capitalism. Furthermore, it shows how the ideal types of poker players correspond to class positions in postindustrial capitalism.

Even though the book is written with the intention of being read from beginning to end, it is also possible for readers with particular interests to approach the different parts of the book in an order other than the one immediately suggested by the disposition. A scholar of contemporary social theory might want to begin with part 4 and then turn back to part 1. A poker player with an interest in the game in its own right will probably want to start at the beginning. Chapters 1 and 3 are, however, the most de-

manding chapters to read because of the extensive use of philosophical terminology. An alternative option is to skip forward to parts 2 and 3 before reading part 1. A reader with a particular interest in problem gambling might want to start with part 3 and perhaps even approach the chapters 6 through 8 in reverse order. Scholars of the culture of gambling will want to read the book from beginning to end.

In other words: shuffle up and read!

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♦   The Ontology of Poker

Is poker a game of chance or a game of skill? This has been a controversial issue in much debate about poker in the wake of the poker boom. We might provide a quick answer to the question by paraphrasing the Marx Brothers joke, where Groucho answers the standard question "Tea or coffee?" with "Yes, please!" So: Yes, poker is a game of chance or skill!

The question about whether poker is a game of chance or skill does indeed raise interesting epistemological issues. However, the reason that this question stirs up controversy is not because there is a widespread interest in such philosophical issues. It is rather the fact that the categorization of poker within law, politics, morality, and even public health has hinged on the outcome of the controversy. The line of reasoning seems to be that if it were determined that poker is a game of chance, it could be placed in the same category as roulette, slot machines, and other familiar gambling games. The game would thus be subject to the same legal and political regulation, it would have the same dubious moral quality, and it would require the same preventive and therapeutic measures in relation to problem gambling as these games. If, on the other hand, it could be proved that poker is a game of skill, it would fall into the same category as chess. The game should thus be exempted from the legal and political restrictions pertaining to gambling games. Great poker play ought to be considered an expression of virtue rather than a vice. And it might even be justified to deny any possible connection between poker and problem gambling.

From a philosophical point of view, many of these debates about poker

in recent years, in the media, in political debates, and in the courtrooms, have been a mess. And the primary reason for the mess is that the initial question itself is fallacious. To ask whether poker is a game of chance or a game of skill is to assume that it is either-or. Yet the essential characteristic of poker is precisely that it is both. Poker is a game that requires a very particular set of skills related to the art of navigating in an environment that is ultimately governed by chance. Once it is recognized that there is an intricate interrelation between skill and chance in poker, and that the game does not fit unambiguously into either category—game of chance or game of skill—it also becomes evident that poker does not really fit into the usual classification schemes of law, politics, morals, and public health.

The object of the current chapter is to do a philosophical analysis of poker. Analysis is here understood in the original meaning of the word as separating an entity into its parts in order to study its structure. The outcome of a game of poker is determined by three elements: chance, mathematical-logical deduction, and psychological empathy. In the actual play the three elements are interwoven in a way that makes them almost indistinguishable in practice. The analysis separates the three elements of poker by associating each of the elements with a particular game. The three games are chess, roulette, and Rock-Paper-Scissors. The argument is that, philosophically, poker is a hybrid of these games.

ŽIŽEK AND POKER ANALYSIS

In order to do the analysis of poker, a philosophical framework is required. A philosophical theory is a reservoir of concepts, definitions, and analytical distinctions. The theory is a tool for thinking that sharpens our understanding of the object of analysis. The analysis of poker, not only in the current chapter but throughout the entire book, is almost exclusively structured by the philosophical theory of one particular thinker, Slavoj Žižek.

The choice of Žižek as the analytic master figure of the book is not justified by any work he has done on the subject of poker. In fact, even though few subjects are strange to Žižek's relentless explorations of contemporary culture in all its manifestations, I have not found a single reference to poker in all of his oeuvre. Nevertheless, the initial idea for this book was sparked by a sense of striking resemblance between the functioning of analysis in Žižek's works and the way a game of poker proceeds.

The philosophical infrastructure of Žižek's analytical perspective is made up by the distinction between three different ontological orders: the

real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. Žižek's analyses typically circle around the inevitable interrelatedness between these three orders. The three orders come together to constitute the reality in which we live and understand ourselves as human subjects. Žižek's point is often to show that every stable and seemingly regular order is founded on the covering up of an underlying fragile, paradoxical, even uncanny structure. The insistence on fragility and paradox extends even to his own theorizing. As a reader of his writings, you find yourself constantly struggling to catch up with the manic pace of the argument. And just as you think you are about to figure out where Žižek is going, the argument breaks off into a new direction. Žižek's analysis never settles into a stringent coherent argument. This leaves the reader with a constant feeling that the object of study always eludes the analysis just before it is completed.

The infrastructure of poker is also three-dimensional. This is perhaps the source of the apparent resemblance with Žižek's thinking. A game of poker is determined in an intricate interplay between chance, mathematical-logical deduction, and psychology. These three dimensions seem to correspond to the distinction between real, symbolic, and imaginary. Furthermore, it is characteristic of poker that none of these dimensions may be subsumed under either one of the others. All three dimensions are inevitably at play simultaneously. This means that the relation between poker strategy and actual poker play has a certain similarity with the relation between a Žižekian analysis and the object of this analysis. Knowledge of poker strategy may certainly improve a player's chances of winning, yet the strategy is always incomplete in terms of fully mastering the game. The game always seems to elude complete strategizing.

In Žižek, we find a philosophical theory of the relation between language, imagination, and reality. The theory is heavily inspired by the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan. This means that it is also a psychological theory of the subject. Furthermore, Žižek has done extensive work applying the theory to cultural and political phenomena. Under great influence of Marxist thinking, the theory is thus also a sociological theory of capitalism.

The versatility of Žižek's theory is another reason that his thinking appears particularly suited for the study of poker. It allows us to combine, within one and the same theoretical framework, philosophical analysis of the ontology of poker (part 1) with a psychological analysis of poker players (part 3), and to conclude with a sociological analysis of the relation between poker and contemporary capitalism (part 4). The descriptive analysis of the poker economy (part 2) is, however, a Žižek-free zone.

The current chapter serves not just as an analysis of the ontology of poker. Since the analyses of the remaining parts of the book (part 2 excluded) draw upon the thinking and terminology of Žižek, it is necessary to introduce and define some of the key concepts of the theory. It is the aim of this chapter to provide such introduction parallel to performing the actual analysis.

The triad of imaginary-symbolic-real designates three different orders of the ontological constitution of the world. Briefly stated, the real is the undifferentiated existence of matter, the symbolic is the system of signs differentiating matter and inscribing it into a coherent universe of meaning, and the imaginary consists of fantasmatic projections mediating the gap between the real and the symbolic.

In practice, it is, however, most often impossible to pinpoint the individual orders separate from each other. Instead, the three orders should be regarded as different dimensions of any event taking place. From an analytical perspective, it is not the discriminatory distinction between the orders that is interesting, but rather their mutual interaction, interplay, and interrelatedness. The triad of imaginary-symbolic-real is sometimes illustrated through the figure of the so-called Borromean Knot (fig. 1).[1]

Close examination of the figure reveals that no two circles are directly linked. The holding together of any two circles is conditioned by interconnection of the third, and the entire chain is held together by the simultaneous folding together of the three circles into each other. If one circle were to be taken out of the knot, the other two would drift apart unconnected.

Analyzing psychological, sociological, or cultural phenomena through Žižek's philosophy is often a question of uncovering how all three orders of the triad of imaginary, symbolic, and real are at play simultaneously. And the object of the analysis is often to point to the functioning of a particular order of the triad that is not immediately apparent.

In our analysis of poker, we shall see that the game is only properly understood when the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real dimensions of the game are all taken into account in one and the same analytical movement. This applies to our analytical perspective of the game, but in fact it also applies to the player's perspective of the game when attempting to master it successfully. Negligence of one of the dimensions is fatal for understanding the game as well as for playing of game.

However, the full implications of these considerations become apparent only when we have a proper understanding of the functioning of the three orders.
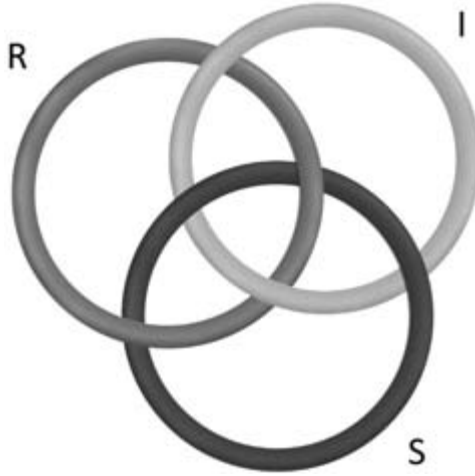
Fig. 1. The Borromean Knot

CHESS AND THE SYMBOLIC

The symbolic order emerges as the undifferentiated being of the real is rendered meaningful through signs, language, law, and other forms of symbolization. The chaotic, meaningless, unmanageable real is thereby processed into a meaningful, regulated, and somewhat predictable social reality. Once we have ordered matter and human beings by means of a symbolic order of signs, we also have a system for understanding and knowing what to expect from these otherwise incalculable entities. In popular sociology, this process is what is often referred to as the "social construction of reality," the analysis of which is the concern of so-called social constructivists.

The social reality generated through the order of the symbolic is no direct reflection of the material matter of the real. It is crucial here to note Žižek's distinction between *reality* and *the real*.[2] We may say that reality is not preexistent in the real. The symbolization of real entities is regulated through principles and regularities inherent in the symbolic order itself. This idea is by no means unique to Žižek. It is rather the rule of most contemporary sociological theories about language to view the process of signification as a process of construction governed by language-immanent rules rather than a process of mere representation governed by extralinguistic rules.

One of the classic proponents of such a notion of language is Ludwig Wittgenstein. In the major work of his later philosophy, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein makes the following proposition about the function of language: "The meaning of a word is its use in the language."[3] The point of the statement is that language is not considered to be a logical function of some language-external world. The relation is rather the other way around. Through the use of language we project beliefs, values, expectations, norms, and so forth onto the world as we experience it. Thus, use of language and experience of the world become inseparable.

This is not to say that the use of language is arbitrary. Use of language is indeed governed by rules. These rules, however, have no support in transcendental or otherwise metalinguistic structures. Instead, the rules of language are grounded in the practice of language use. The rules of language are inherent to language. Wittgenstein employs the word "grammar" to designate these rules.

What we find in the late Wittgenstein is actually a very sociological notion of language. Language is not just a neutral medium for expressing the values, norms, beliefs, and experiences of a community. Instead, language is viewed as a constituent part of the very shaping of our shared social experience of the world: "The speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."[4]

It is relevant to consider Wittgenstein in the present context not just because he is one of the classic proponents of the understanding of language that we find in Žižek's notion of the symbolic order. It is also the fact that in order to account for his understanding of language he invokes the metaphor of the "language game." This metaphor refers to ways in which language is governed by language-immanent rules, grammar, in the same way that a game is governed by rules inherent in the game. Language consists of different language games, and the use of language comprises a kind of "playing" of these language games.

In order to unfold the analogy between language and games, Wittgenstein in several places makes explicit reference to chess. Chess is of course an obvious illustration of the idea that the meaning of something is not a direct function of the material properties of the thing but rather a function of the social conventions surrounding the thing. The meaning of the king in chess does not derive from the particular shape and color of the piece but rather from the way the king moves in the game and its particular role in the determination of the outcome of the game.[5] The mere designation of a particular piece as "the king" does not explain to an outsider the actual

meaning of the piece. Only when the person is told what to do with the piece and how to employ it strategically in the game in relation to the other pieces does the person start to learn the meaning of the piece and the meaning of the game as a whole. The same goes for the words of a language. The meaning of a word consists in its relation to other words and its use in combination with other words.

In Žižek, the symbolic order consists of chains of signifiers comparable to Wittgenstein's language games. Things, events, people, actions, emotions, and so forth are incorporated into the symbolic order through a process of signification. Insofar as these things initially belong to the real order of material existence, the process of signification may in some sense be understood as a process of transubstantiation from the real to the symbolic order.

And in the same way that the use of language and the perception of the world in Wittgenstein become indistinguishable, there is in Žižek the idea that the process of symbolization also bars our immediate access to the order of the real. Once we have entered the realm of social reality, we lose any immediate access to the real.[6] This is exemplified by the way we lose access to the real sound of somebody's voice once we become aware of the meaning of what the person is saying. When hearing our own voice, for example, on a recording, we seem to regain awareness of the real of the voice insofar as we abstract from the meaning of the words spoken. Such experience is often accompanied by a feeling of discomfort illustrating the "uncanniness" of the real stemming from the fact that we are not used to such direct experience of the real. Instead, we are used to experiencing the real through the medium of the symbolic order, that is, as reality, not as real.

Wittgenstein's choice of chess as illustration for his philosophical point may be coincidental, and he might just as well have used any other game to convey the same argument. If we move from the level of the formal rules of the game to the level of the actual play determining the outcome of the game, there is, however, something about chess that makes it stands out among games as a particularly well-suited illustration of the way the symbolic order functions.

Within the philosophy of chess, there is a fundamental dispute between a romantic and a scientistic conception of chess.[7] According to the romantics, chess is a game of vision, creativity, imagination, and freedom, and it cannot be reduced to deterministic calculations and mathematical algorithms.[8] The scientistic conception, propagated among others by researchers and developers in artificial intelligence (AI), sees chess as a game

that precisely lends itself in the last instance to formalization and reduction into a game of calculation and mathematical algorithms.[9] Even though the dispute is perhaps not conclusively settled on the philosophical level, the scientists certainly delivered a very strong argument for their position when in 1997 the IBM chess computer Deep Blue defeated Garry Kasparov, the world champion at the time.

If we accept the argument that chess is in the last instance a game of mathematical calculation, we can assert that ideally for every position and every move an optimal countermove could be calculated by hypothetically playing through the different possible scenarios following from different possible moves. This approach is the foundation of the Game-Tree search method used in AI computers playing chess.[10] Whenever one player deviates from the optimal course of the game, the other player can take advantage of the "mistake" and gain an edge in the game by once again choosing the optimal move. The winning player would be the one deviating least from the optimal course of play.

This means that not only are the formal rules of the game inscribed into the symbolic order of the game but even the optimal moves guaranteeing a favorable outcome of the game can be derived from this symbolic order. This is indeed the notion of chess we find in Neumann and Morgenstern's classic exposition of game theory: "If the theory of Chess were really fully known there would be nothing left to play."[11] The laws governing not only legitimate but also strategically optimal play are present in the symbolic order prior to the first move, and if we were only able intellectually to grasp these laws, the actual course and outcome of the game would be predetermined given that both players would be playing to win. Hence there would be no reason to play out the game in the real.

This idea of chess corresponds to an idea found in modern physics. In his famous Principle of Sufficient Reason, Leibniz states that that "there can be no fact real or existing, no statement true, unless there be a sufficient reason, why it should be so and not otherwise, although these reasons usually cannot be known by us."[12] Initially formulated as a law of logic, this principle carries over into science, constituting the backbone of classic mechanical Newtonian physics. The goal envisaged by Newton was a complete theory of physics able to account scientifically for every event and in principle to predict any course of events in the physical world. The universe, according to Newtonian physics, is one where spontaneity, randomness, and metaphysical intervention of any kind may be reduced to

causal, deterministic, physical explanations following the fundamental laws of nature, that is, a world where any event in the real may ideally be accounted for in the order of the symbolic.[13] The goal of classic mechanistic physics is thus to bring the symbolic order of science into accord with this ideal, completing an all-encompassing theory of physics.

The completion of a perfect theory of chess, like the completion of a perfect theory of physics, would constitute a complete system of symbolization of the real. The theory would be able to account for the complete meaning of every possible game situation, insofar as it would be able to point unambiguously to the optimal move in each and every one of these situations. No move made by the opponent would constitute a challenge to the theory, as all possible future moves by the opponent are already included and anticipated in the theory's account of the current situation.

Winning in chess thus boils down to the ability to conform to the laws of the symbolic order of the game, neutralizing any intervention from the real in the course of one's play. Just as the Newtonian physicist brings his reasoning into accord with unambiguous laws of physics, the chess player is encouraged to optimize play by evaluating every move by way of mathematical calculation. Ideally, no move in chess should be influenced by spontaneity, distraction, emotion, and so on, and the chess-playing subject should approach a state of desubjectification, where it has become a neutral medium for the execution of the a priori laws of chess strategy inherent in the symbolic order of the game.[14] Paraphrasing Leibniz, the credo of the game of chess could be formulated: "There should be no move unless there be a sufficient reason why it should be so and not otherwise."

ROULETTE AND THE REAL

In the scientistic conception, the hindrance to reaching a complete theory of chess is of a practical nature. It is merely a question of figuring out the proper algorithms and disposing sufficient calculative resources, whether in the form of human intellect or brute computer power. In other words, complete symbolization of the real in chess is possible—at least in principle.

I have used chess as an analogy to the functioning of the symbolic order. So far, I have been defining the symbolic order in accordance with Wittgenstein's notion of language. And so far we have not seen what is particular to Žižek's notion of language and the symbolic. Actually, we may identify the point where Žižek's notion of the symbolic order breaks away

from Wittgenstein's theory of language (and from most other ordinary so-
cial constructivist theories of language and reality)—precisely at the point
where the analogy between chess and language falls short.

Even if we agree to the possibility of complete symbolization of the real
in the limited world of chess, it is a basic point in Žižek's thinking that this
does not hold true for most other forms of symbolization and certainly not
for language in general. On the contrary, Žižek states that incompleteness
is an inherent feature of symbolization, and this incompleteness should not
be regarded as just a temporary state due to practical limitations. The im-
possibility of complete symbolization is a condition of the very ontological
constitution of the symbolic order.

In chess, the incompleteness of symbolization manifests itself at the
margins of the system of symbolization. A skilled player may be able to
foresee the potential consequences of different play options five moves
ahead and thus make an estimate of the value of each possible move in the
current situation. A given move may, however, have unfortunate conse-
quences that only occur six, seven, or perhaps fourteen moves ahead. Since
the calculative resources of a human being are limited, a player is able to
analyze the game situation within a system of symbolization only to a cer-
tain extent. Beyond these limits the player's calculative symbolization falls
short. The proper analogy here would be one of a cartographer who has
mapped out a certain geographical area. The map covers only a limited
segment of the world, and beyond these limits the map simply falls short in
describing the world.

In Žižek's understanding of language and signification, incompleteness
does not manifest itself at the margins of symbolization but at the very
heart of the symbolic order. Any symbolic order is constituted by a "lack"
of symbolization, a point where symbolization is impossible. This lack is
not just a mark of the insufficiency of the symbolization. It functions as the
very structuring principle of the symbolic order. Žižek states that "the
symbolic field is in itself always already barred, crippled, porous, structured
around some extimate kernel, some impossibility."[15] He goes on to state
that this impossibility is the very condition of possibility for symbolization
and for the constitution of social reality: "Reality itself is nothing but an
embodiment of a certain blockage in the process of symbolization. For re-
ality to exist, something must be left unspoken." "[T]here is 'reality' only
in so far as there is an ontological gap, a crack, at its very heart—that is, a
traumatic excess, a foreign body that cannot be integrated into it."[16]

What we find in this "ontological gap," this black hole of the symbolic

universe, is of course the real. This time, however, the real is not just passively awaiting meaningful interpretation through inscription into a coherent symbolic order. Instead, the real emerges as that which "resists symbolization," "as the rock upon which every attempt at symbolization stumbles."[17] In order to understand what Žižek is referring to in these rather enigmatic statements about the real, we shall be looking into the game of roulette.

If we were to apply the Principle of Sufficient Reason to roulette as we did to chess, the most logical and rational thing to do would be not to bet at all. Basic probability theory will soon show the gambler that the odds are in favor of the house and that this is where the money is going to end up in the long run. Such logical considerations, however, miss the essence of the game of roulette. Roulette is not a game of logic and mathematical reason; it is rather a game *against* logic and reason.

Probability theory constitutes a logical system for the symbolization of the game situation. It ascribes probabilities to different outcomes, so that on a traditional French single-zero wheel the chances of winning, for instance, on either red or black are 18 to 37, on a single number 1 to 37, and on a column 12 to 37. Comparing these figures to the payout structure, simple math will tell you that no bet in a game of roulette can be profitable *in the long run.*

What is overlooked in this purely statistical approach to roulette is that the true gambler does not play the game *in the long run.* The enchanting charm of the game, its very essence, lies in the stubborn insistence on the meaning of the single instance, or perhaps rather, the lack of meaning of the single instance.

Say a gambler bets $1,000 on the single number 9 and the ball indeed lands on this number giving a win of $36,000. If we regard this outcome as part of a larger series of instances, which are on an aggregate level normally distributed, there is nothing mysterious, thrilling, or in any way exciting about the win. Probability theory tells us that if the gambler were to repeat this bet a large number of times, the overall winnings would approach a given average of minus $27 per bet. Over time, the statistical order will gradually assert itself.

The excitement of roulette comes from the fact, however, that while probability theory may indeed be able to account for the mathematical order emerging in the long run, it is not able to predict the single instance. There is a gap between "the long run" and "the short run," and this gap is equivalent to Žižek's ontological gap between the symbolic and the real.

Probability theory is unable to explain why this particular gambler at this particular moment wins on this particular bet. The single instance constitutes a "piece of the real" resisting symbolization. The single instance constitutes the lack residing at the very heart of the symbolic order of probability theory.

It is often overlooked that there are two sides in the game of roulette. On the one side, we find the gambler, who gets to decide where the money is bet. On the other side, we find the "house," the casino that has to accept the gambler's bet but in return gets to be on the advantageous side of the odds. The house views the game from the perspective of the long run. It is confident that an occasional "run of luck" on behalf of a gambler will even out over time. And even if one gambler retires from the table with a win, there will be other gamblers compensating the casino through their losses. The true gambler, however, has the opposite approach, viewing the game from the perspective of the short run, the single instance. What matters are not average wins or losses over a large number of runs of the wheel but what happens right here, right now. This approach to roulette is most famously expressed by Dostoyevsky in his semiautobiographical novel *The Gambler*. Here the protagonist says: "True, out of a hundred persons, only one can win; yet what business is that of yours or of mine?"[18]

This stubborn refutation of probability theory is not due to the gambler's misconception of the "true" stochastic nature of the game. On the contrary, the deliberate denial of statistics constitutes the very essence of the game. The player is seduced into conceiving of the individual instance in its singularity, not as manifestation of a general law but as an instance bearing meaning in and of itself.[19] Playing roulette is about letting oneself become seduced, despite rational reasons for the opposite.

The house perspective of the game is of course that of the symbolic order. The interpretation of chance through probability theory is precisely an example of the transposition of the real into the order of the symbolic. The gambler's perspective, on the contrary, is that of the real. His encounter with the real is not mediated through the predictable order of social reality. What manifests itself in the singular instance in roulette is the real as that which "resists symbolization."

In this direct encounter, the gambler experiences the very ambivalent nature of the real. On the one hand, the real of the single instance is completely meaningless. As we have seen, the abstract accounts of the probabilities of winning and losing break down in the case of the single instance, and the insufficiency of the symbolic order reveals itself in the absence of

an explanation to the question "Why should *I* win on *this* bet *now*?" On the other hand, the direct encounter with the real produces a proliferation of meaning. Now all of a sudden anything becomes potentially meaningful. The color of a woman's shirt may be a sign that red is the outcome of the next spin of the wheel. The number on a taxi license plate may be a sign that I will win on 24. Or the win in itself may be a sign that the gambler is favored by some kind of divine entity, Destiny, Lady Luck, or even God.

Here is how one author describes the proliferation of meaning and the gambler's attempt to achieve some kind of correspondence with the real, not through ordinary representative symbolization but by bringing himself into harmony with "the mystic rhythm of the universe":

> Man, devoid of all secular capacity except cajolery, and all knowledge of cause and effect except the laws of probability, places himself before the unknown and seeks grace of the deity Fortune. He talks to the dice or makes a system at roulette, imploring favor. He wears charms, tips beggars, won't eat peanuts before a race if he is a jockey, alternates incantations with silent blasphemy, all to seek the mystic rhythm of the universe and determine its future—a chosen man whose distinction will be symbolized by the substance of his win.[20]

The gambler's universe of meaning is of another kind than the ordinary social reality. It is not the meaning emerging from the signification of the real. It is rather as if the real itself becomes a sign. The gambler's encounter with the real in the single instance is like the collision between subatomic particles produced in a particle accelerator. What happens is an implosion between the symbolic and the real. Just as the particle accelerator momentarily breaks down the regular deterministic laws of Newtonian physics in favor of the pure unpredictable spontaneity of quantum physics, so does the win or loss at the roulette table momentarily suspend the ordinary system of meaning of social reality. And in the same way as events in the subatomic universe of quantum physics—entities that are simultaneously waves and particles or pairs of particles that are spatially separated but nevertheless correlated in their behavior—incite the uncanny feeling of looking through a window into a mystical universe beyond human comprehension, so does the win or loss at the roulette table sometimes engender the feeling of being at the mercy of forces traversing the distinction between the "dead" physical world and the "live" world of meaning and symbols. It is as if matter has become endowed with some form of life. Meaning is transposed directly into matter itself.

Here is how two inveterate gamblers describe the feeling of losing in Blackjack:

> You begin to sense that, for all the mathematics, the calculations, the odds, the multiplying strategies of working the percentages, something else is at work, some loopy otherworldly thing. It seems built into the cards. There comes a point when you begin to think you know the cards before they're dealt. You've made a big bet, you're holding an eighteen and the dealer is showing an eight, and you think you've pushed, you're safe. Then you think, Unless she has an ace. No sooner have you had the second thought than you know she *has* the ace. You wish she didn't, but you know she does. And when she flips her down card there it is, the ace. And you lose again. Then you think that you *caused* her to have the ace by thinking it. Do we believe all this? Sure we do, though not in the same way one believes mathematics. It doesn't do to spend a lot of time thinking about it, but it's out there, and when it's happening it is too real to disregard.[21]

Roulette is a demonstration that the symbolization of the real is incomplete. Žižek sometimes refers to the symbolic order as the "big Other." And roulette is a demonstration of the "lack in the big Other." Insofar as the object of chess is to reach the highest possible level of symbolization of the real, the two games may be conceived as diametrically opposites. If chess is a game based on the Principle of Sufficient Reason, roulette is a game based on a principle of insufficient reason.

ROCK-PAPER-SCISSORS AND THE IMAGINARY

As we have seen here, the basic tenet in Žižek's thinking is the irreconcilability of the symbolic and the real. Depending on the analytic perspective from which we approach this irreconcilability, it manifests itself as an incompleteness, lack, or aporia in the symbolic order or as a deficit or surplus of the real. In the philosophy of Žižek, the aim is never to reconcile philosophically the split between the real and the symbolic, for instance by giving primacy to one or the other side. Instead, the split is accepted as a fundamental condition, and the philosophical task is now to analyze *how* subjects and societies deal with this traumatic split between the real and the symbolic. This is where philosophy turns into psychology or sociology. The management of the split between the real and the symbolic, whether in the psychic life of subjects or the social life of societies, takes place in the third order of the Lacanian triad of ontological orders, the imaginary.

Since there is no logically consistent solution to the problem of the relation between the real and the symbolic, the imaginary order has the form of fantasy. The symbolic order presents itself as the order of logic, regularity, rule of law, predictability, coherence, completeness, and so on. The order of the imaginary, on the contrary, has the form of paradox, tautology, and incoherence. As we have seen, the logic and completeness of the symbolic order are only apparent, and the maintenance of this appearance is precisely the function of the imaginary order. Thus, the two orders are not contradictions but rather opposite sides of the same coin. Or to put it perhaps even more to the point: the two orders are on the one side of the same Möbius band.

In the order of the imaginary, we find a vague and often not fully articulated fantasy about a completed state of the symbolic order where contradictions and antagonisms have been overcome.

> The function of fantasy is to fill the opening in the Other, to conceal its inconsistency. . . . Fantasy conceals the fact that the Other, the symbolic order, is structured around some traumatic impossibility, around something which cannot be symbolized.[22]

Žižek often uses the terms "imaginary" and "ideological" interchangeably. The function of the imaginary should, however, not be confused with the popular notion of ideology as a veil covering up the true state of reality. On the contrary, if we keep in mind the distinction between the real and reality, ideology is part of the very fabric of reality. In a key formulation Žižek puts it this way:

> Ideology is not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our "reality" itself: an "illusion" which structures our effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel. . . . The function of ideology is not to offer us some point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel.[23]

The imaginary may indeed serve to cover up an underlying traumatic split, but the covering up is an inherent part of the very functioning of reality.[24] The imaginary is not a derivative form of ontological order, the neutralization of which would result in a state of truth. The truth does not reside somewhere behind or beyond the order of the imaginary but in the very imaginary interweaving of the real and the symbolic.

We can observe the functioning of the imaginary, for instance, in the

constitution of subjectivity. W. Somerset Maugham tells the story of the appointment in Samarra, which is a beautiful illustration of the dialectics involved in the constitution of subjectivity. The story is narrated by Death:

> There was a merchant in Bagdad who sent his servant to market to buy provisions and in a little while the servant came back, white and trembling, and said, Master, just now when I was in the market-place I was jostled by a woman in the crowd and when I turned I saw it was Death that jostled me. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture; now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra and there death will not find me. The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, and he dug his spurs in its flanks and as fast as the horse could gallop he went. Then the merchant went down to the market-place and he saw me standing in the crowd and he came to me and said, Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning? That was not a threatening gesture, I said, it was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Bagdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.[25]

The tale should be read here as an allegory of the relationship between the subject and the big Other of the symbolic order. The encounter with Death in the marketplace represents the subject's position in the symbolic order. At first glance the big Other takes the shape of Destiny, determining the identity and the course of the individual's life. The servant, however, does not readily accept his destiny. He resists the symbolic identity appointed to him and escapes to Samarra.

The subject, in the shape here of the unfortunate servant, imagines the big Other as a closed and coherent system observing the subject in a totalizing fashion. What the subject fails to see is that the big Other is by no means a closed system but is rather dependent on the subject for its own realization. Only through the subject's resistance to the big Other, only through the subject's insistence on its own free and independent will, does the big Other complete itself.

There is in the subject's imagination of the big Other a paradox at play. On the one hand, the big Other is overestimated, in that the subject believes the big Other can bypass the "free will" of the subject and unilaterally execute the "social destiny" of the subject. On the other hand, the big Other is underestimated, in that the subject imagines itself as having the capacity for avoiding this destiny and does not realize the way in which the

subject's resistance to the big Other is already included in the functioning of the big Other. The maintenance of this paradox takes place in the order of the imaginary.

In Žižek's thinking, subjectivity is not the immediate result of a totalizing process of "social construction" whereby the individual subject is socialized into a preestablished set of social roles, identities, positions, and so on. Subjectivity emerges, rather, at the points where these symbolic designations break down. Subjectivity emerges not where the subject identifies with its position in the symbolic order of society but precisely where the subject does not identify with these positions. When the subject is integrated into the social order through symbolization, there is always a remainder left behind, barring the complete social integration of the subject. There is a feeling of "This is not me" and "I am more than this." This feeling constitutes a "piece of the real" resisting symbolization, and at the same time this piece of the real becomes the surface for the subject's imaginary projections about its own self. This is where subjectivity emerges. The incompleteness of the inclusion of the subject into the symbolic order is the precondition for the subject's self-image as an independent and free will. Insofar as this self-image is also a precondition for the subject's normal functioning in social reality, the incompleteness of the subject's inclusion is at the same time the very condition of possibility for the subject's full inclusion.

In the emergence of subjectivity as simultaneously a surplus of the real, a lack in the symbolic order, and a fantasy of the imaginary order, we see an example of the general functioning of the imaginary order. Not only does the fantasmatic imaginary order function to cover up the excess of the real not contained by symbolization. At the same time the imaginary order functions to appropriate this excess in order to transform it into an extrasymbolic confirmation of the symbolic order. When such appropriation works successfully, the remainder of the real "left behind" by the "social construction of reality" reemerges as an "answer from the real" to a basic question of the meaning of the symbolic order.[26] The imaginary order serves to connect the symbolic and the real not in a relation of representation but rather by establishing "quilting points" (*point de capiton*) where the real is woven into the fabric of reality. Žižek explains:

> Why must the symbolic mechanism be hooked onto a "thing," some piece of the real? The Lacanian answer is, of course: because the symbolic field is in itself always already bared, crippled, porous, structured around some extimate kernel, some impossibility. The function of the

"little piece of the real" is precisely to fill out the place of this void that gapes in the very heart of the symbolic.[27]

In order to explicate further the functioning of the imaginary order and hint at its relevance to poker, we shall be turning to the game of Rock-Paper-Scissors (RPS). The game is typically played between two players. The players "pump" their arms in synchronization and after the third pump they simultaneously deliver their "throw" in the form of Rock, Paper, or Scissors each represented by a distinct formation of the hand. The outcome of a throw is decided according to a circular ranking of hand values according to which Paper beats Rock, Rock beats Scissors, and Scissors beat Paper. Equal hands result in a draw. A match is often decided as the outcome of a best out of three rounds. Tournament play often has a more elaborate format with best of three rounds constituting only a set and the entire match being decided as a best of five sets.

In the classic analysis of RPS in game theory, Neumann and Morgenstern demonstrate that any one of the players may turn the game into a game of pure chance through the application of a strategy playing each of the different throws with a probability of one-third.[28] In other words, the player should apply the game options Rock, Paper, or Scissors in a completely random fashion. The result of this strategy is that even if the opponent were aware of the player's strategy, he would not be able to apply any counterstrategy that would give him a better chance of winning than 50 percent. In return, the player's application of the strategy of complete randomization would bar him from exploiting eventual errors in the opponent. He would be secured against losing any more than 50 percent of the rounds on average but he would also not be able to win any more than 50 percent on average. Thus, the application of a randomized strategy by either one of the players would force the game into a form structurally equivalent to coin-tossing, that is, into a game of pure chance.

We cannot, however, infer from this analysis that RPS is basically a game of chance. First, human beings are not machines, and even with the intention of applying the completely randomized strategy, they are in practice almost always going to execute the strategy with some amount of non-random systematic bias. In *The Official Rock Paper Scissors Strategy Guide*, this point is stated as follows:

> Human beings are utterly incapable of acting in a purely random fashion, despite appearances. Everything we do has some motivation behind it. This is certainly not to say that humans are always rational or logical,

only that there is some kernel of a reason nestled somewhere in the dark caverns of the brain.[29]

Second, even if human beings were able to apply the completely randomized strategy, for example, through the aid of a mechanical randomization device, they would in most game situations not be content with just a 50 percent chance of winning. As noted by Neumann and Morgenstern, the randomized strategy prescribed by game theory is optimal only from a defensive point of view.[30] If a player feels confident that he is able to exploit weaknesses in the opponent's play, he is going to opt for a different strategy. This also applies if the player's desire to win is stronger than his fear of losing, or if he is in the game for the thrill of playing and not for the dull execution of a mechanical strategy that is only going to maintain a status quo. The strategy book sums the point up:

> Each [player] will make a conscious choice of which throw to make with the express desire of humiliating his adversary. So to assign basic probability to an RPS match would be a grave error, unless the player's aspiration reaches only to a height of mediocrity.[31]

This means that in actual game situations players will most often deviate intentionally or unintentionally from the purely randomized game-theoretical strategy. This is the point where the game of RPS opens up to strategy beyond randomization and thus potentially becomes a game of skill.

RPS strategy is all about the player gaining information on the opponent's play without giving away information about his own play. Yet, the status of the information available in RPS is of a different nature than the information available in a game like chess. In chess, the relative values of different moves may be deduced logically based on the information immediately available on the board about the current game situation. The logical processing of information may thus provide conclusive answers when deciding between different moves. In this respect, RPS provides the diametrical opposite to chess. In RPS, the game setting does not immediately provide any information for logic to work with. Each player has three possible moves, and from a strictly logical perspective, the moves are of equivalent value. This difference between chess and RPS may be described as a difference between a game of perfect information and a game of imperfect information.

To some extent, RPS is similar here to roulette, since the betting options in roulette from a purely mathematical perspective are also of equiv-

alent value, for example, the expected value of a $1,000 bet on red, on the single number 9, or on the third column are all minus $27. But the structural similarity between roulette and RPS goes only so far. In roulette, the idea of utilizing any kind of information to gain strategic advantage in the game is illusionary. This is not the case in RPS. In RPS strategy, we encounter a third form of information that has neither the purely illusionary character of the information in roulette nor the perfectly exact nature of the information in chess. It is a kind of information that is neither at the mercy of the real resisting symbolization nor reducible to the logical regularities of the symbolic order. Information in RPS is a very pure example of knowledge contingent upon the order of the imaginary.

RPS strategy relies on a number of different ways of gaining information about an opponent's play.

1. A player may predict the nature of her opponent's throw by observing physical "tells" in the opponent. Typical tells include the so-called rock jaw, where tension around the jaw muscles prior to the throw reveals the intention of playing an aggressive rock; the "scissor fingers," where excess tension between index finger and thumb indicates the intention of throwing Scissors, and the "paper hook," where the underarm is prematurely twisted toward the horizontal position of the Paper.

2. There is the assumption in RPS strategy that the different throws incite different subconscious associations based on the nature of the real object they represent. Depending on their general psychological constitution, different players will form certain attachments and a preference for certain throws in certain situations. The vivid theory about the different throws is worth quoting a length:

> Represented as it is by a closed fist, Rock is commonly perceived as the most aggressive throw. It taps into memories of fistfights, and it conjures up images of tall and unmoving mountains, rugged boulders, and the stone axe of the cavemen. Without realizing it, most players think of Rock as a weapon and will fall back on it for protection when other strategies appear to be failing. . . .
>
> Paper is often considered the subtlest of the three throws. There is nothing aggressive about the limp documents that move across our desks and through out offices. Even the gesture used to represent Paper is peaceful—an open palm much like the gesture used in a salute or a handshake. Historically, an open palm has been a sign of friendship and peace because an open hand cannot hold a weapon. Some players, who subconsciously perceive Paper as a sign of weakness or surrender, will

shy away from using it entirely or will drop it from their game when they are falling behind. . . .

Scissors are a tool. As children, we use them to cut construction paper for craft projects. As adults, we may cut cloth for clothing or use scissors to open irritating plastic packaging. Scissors are associated with industry, craftwork, and construction. There is still a certain amount of aggression associated with scissors; they are, after all, sharp and dangerous implements. Different from the thuglike force of Rock, Scissors represent aggression that is controlled, contained, and rechanneled into something constructive.[32]

RPS play is often conceived not only as the execution of individual throws but as a sequence of "gambits," a series of three successive moves. With twenty-seven possible gambits, this allows for further elaboration of the associative meaning invested in different plays. Classic gambits include the Avalanche (Rock-Rock-Rock), Fistful O'Dollars (Rock-Paper-Paper), the Scissor Sandwich (Paper-Scissor-Paper), and the Toolbox (Scissor-Scissor-Scissor).

3. Observation of an opponent's play over the course of a significant number of matches may reveal patterns in his play, due to either intentional strategy or unintentional dispositions.[33] This is the kind of analysis used in artificial intelligence robots playing RPS.[34]

We may add a fourth way of gaining information about an RPS adversary, although this is perhaps rather a reflexive function of the three already mentioned. RPS players rarely make their decisions about specific throws solely on the basis of the inherent qualities of the throw itself. The intransitive nature of the ranking system (Rock beats Scissors, Scissors beats Paper, but Rock does not beat Paper) means that assumptions about the opponent's possible action are decisive to the player's choice of throw. Since these assumptions are made in the awareness that the opponent is looking back at the player to form her own assumptions about the player's throw, the decision-making process in RPS quickly spirals into the dialectical movement of first-, second-, third- . . . nth-order observations that are characteristic of this game: "He probably thinks I think he will throw Rock. So he expects me to throw Paper, which he will then beat by throwing Scissors. In order to beat his expected Scissors, I will therefore throw Rock." This kind of thinking is also known as "Sicilian reasoning."

The reflexive nature of the strategic reasoning in RPS, which we have seen here as the fourth way of gaining information, has profound implications for the information gained in the first three forms of observation.

When observing a physical tell in an opponent, the player can never completely rule out the possibility that this tell is not unintentional behavior on the part of the opponent but rather a "false" tell staged with the strategic aim of misguiding the player. Similarly, a 120 kilogram tough guy with tattoos all over his body, whom the player might expect to throw an aggressive Stone as his opening move,[35] may instead turn out to play Scissors on the assumption that the player was indeed expecting him to play Stone. Finally, a skilled player may be able, intentionally, to display certain patterns in his play over the course of a number of rounds only to shift his style of playing as soon as the opponent has picked up on the pattern and adjusts his own play to exploit the information.

Furthermore, reflexivity also means that the theories described under the first three forms of observation need not be actually true in order to become effective in the game situation. One may, for instance, be inclined to write off the theory of the subconscious attachments associated with the different throws as pseudo-Freudian nonsense (or perhaps even worse: pseudo-Jungian nonsense). But even a player not buying into the theory as such may be forced to take it into consideration when facing an opponent who he figures believes in them. If the opponent believes in the theory, he will adjust his play according to his image of the player as say, a Scissors player. Knowing this, the player will be able to counteract by playing Paper. Even in the case where neither the player nor the opponent actually believes in the theory about subconscious attachments, it may still have a real effect on the game, if say the opponent still believes that the player believes in the theory. In this case, the player might reason: "According to the theory, my opponent is a Rock player. Even though my opponent does not believe in the theory, he thinks that I believe in it. He therefore expects me to expect him to throw Rock and he thus expects me to throw Paper. Hence, I can expect him to throw Scissors. Therefore I shall play Rock."

What we see here is a transposition of the imaginary belief needed to support the symbolic theory onto the other subject. Even though the theory is perhaps not immediately true in itself and even though the player does not believe in it herself, the imaginary transposition of belief onto the opponent nevertheless generates the real effects of the theory needed in order to make it true, although in some weird distorted fashion. This mechanism corresponds to Žižek's concept of the "subject presumed to believe." Žižek illustrates this concept by showing how the constant shortage of toilet paper in the socialist former Yugoslavia actually came about:

Our hypothetical starting point is that there is an abundance of toilet paper on the market. But, suddenly and unexpectedly a rumour starts to circulate that there is a shortage of toilet paper—because of this rumour, people frantically begin to buy it, and of course the result is that there is real shortage of toilet paper. At first sight this seems to be a simple mechanism of what is called self-fulfilling prophecy, but the effective way in which it functions is a little more complicated. Each participant reasons as follows: "I'm not naïve and stupid, I know very well that there is more than enough toilet paper in the shops; but there are probably some naïve and stupid people who believe these rumours, who take them seriously and will act accordingly—they will start frantically buying toilet paper and so in the end there will be a real shortage of it; so even if I know very well that there is enough, it would be a good idea to go and by a lot!"[36]

The point is here, that no one actually has to believe in the theories on RPS strategy directly. For the theories to become effective in reality, it is enough that players presume the existence of other players who believe in the theories.

The game of RPS constitutes an extrapolation of the arbitrariness in the relation between a sign and the actual fact the sign is asserted to be signifying. Hence, the symbolic order of RPS is a very unstable one. A player may make a perfectly logical fifth-order observation, but in the end his deductions may be proven wrong since they are built on incorrect assumptions. Sicilian reasoning may err in the initial assumption about a player; say in the assumption that a particular female player is a typical Scissors player.[37] But it may also err in the assumption about the opponent's level of reflexivity. The opponent may indeed be a typical Scissors player, but she may also be capable of Sicilian reasoning herself and thus able to take advantage of her appearance as a typical Scissors player by opening with an unexpected Paper. This type of error may take the shape of an underestimation, as in this case, but overestimations may turn out to be equally fatal. An opponent may be judged as a typical Paper player[38] and he may be assumed capable of third-order Sicilian reasoning, thus thinking: "My adversary thinks I think he thinks I am a Paper player. He therefore expects me to counter his expected Scissors with Rock. Thus, he can be expected to throw Paper. Therefore I will throw Scissors." In order to counter this opponent, the player would throw Rock. However, the player may turn out to be wrong, having fatally overestimated his opponent, who now turns out to be indeed a straightforward Paper player.

The uncertainty inherent in any piece of information about an opponent derives partly from the fact that the player never knows to what extent her gaze at the opponent is already included in the acts of the opponent. This is the same ambivalence we found in the tale about the appointment in Samarra. The servant believes the encounter with Death to be a spontaneous event with an independent meaning to be deciphered by him. What he fails to recognize is that his reading of the event is already included and anticipated in the event itself. The servant fails to realize that his resistance against occupying the place seemingly prepared for him in the symbolic order is in fact already included in the place prepared for him.

We find here an instance of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of the subject characteristic of the general functioning of the symbolic order. A certain void exists in the symbolic order, and this "nothingness" comes to function as the place of the subject. As Žižek explains,

> The subject is not directly included in the symbolic order: it is included as the very point at which signification breaks down. Sam Goldwyn's famous retort when he was confronted with an unacceptable business proposition, "Include me out!," perfectly expresses this intermediate status of the subject's relationship to the symbolic order between direct inclusion and direct exclusion.[39]

The subject is included in the symbolic order through its own exclusion of itself from the symbolic order. This mechanism by which the subject "includes itself out" is only possible through the functioning of the imaginary order. The imaginary order functions precisely by masking the voids in the symbolic order, in this way veiling the inconsistency of the big Other. Thus, on the one hand the servant's "fantasy" about Death as the omnipotent big Other with the capability of executing the servant's Destiny veils the fact that Death is actually dependent on the compliance of the servant. On the other hand, the servant's fantasy of himself as an independent subject capable of resisting Death veils the fact that he is actually complying with the destiny intended for him by the big Other.

Had the servant in the tale been an apt RPS player, he might have survived his intermezzo with Death. RPS is very much a game played out in the order of the imaginary. There is a fundamental incredulity toward any system of signs exhibited by the opponent, since the player is aware that the meaning of the signs may not be their immediate signified but rather their very staging. In the servant's encounter with Death, and in most of our everyday life in society, the imaginary fantasies supporting social real-

ity are not questioned. Such questioning is, however, at the heart of RPS playing. The game can be said to take as its point of departure the Lacanian insight that "there is no Other of the [big] Other,"[40] meaning that the symbolic order is in the last instance not supported by anything other than the subject's own fantasies about the very same symbolic order. Hence, any attempt at mastering the game by establishing a system of signification to logically interpret and symbolize different game situations is immediately thrown into the vertiginous dialectics of Sicilian reasoning and confronted with the inevitable void residing at the core of any system of symbolization. RPS cannot be mastered solely through the logical structures of the symbolic order but forces players to enter the fantasmatic and paradoxical universe of the imaginary.

BORROMEAN KNOT OF POKER

> Poker is a unique game because it approximates life. This is not true of chess, which is circumscribed by a framework of mathematical rules and is therefore irrevocably artificial. Even though the variations of its calculations are almost infinite, the rules are inflexible. That is why there are so many chess players of the rank of genius who are no good at anything else: their extraordinary capacity for mental gymnastics, on the one hand, being off-set, on the other, by a generally below-average allowance of common sense.[41]

Even though we may not fully agree with the rather harsh judgment on chess players, there is certainly a grain of truth in it. In each of the three games explored in this chapter, the pivot point lies very much in one particular ontological order. In poker, we find the three ontological orders, the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary, to be intertwined, and the pivot point of the game lies in the very combination of the three orders. Hence, we may argue that each of the three games explored in this chapter constitutes an extrapolation of one dimension of life, whereas the complex nature of poker makes it a game closer to life itself.

In chess, players compete on their abilities to analyze and understand the positions on the board through logic and calculation. The ideal is to construct a complete system of symbolization without any voids so that any possible future move of the opponent is already anticipated in the current move made by the player. There is here a parallel between chess and poker. In poker, logic and mathematics are also applied in the attempt to master

the game. Mathematics in the form of probability theory is utilized as a means of controlling the element of chance. And logic is used in order to understand and anticipate moves made by the opponent. The level of sophistication in the symbolic order through which players conceive the game is thus also an important factor in poker.

Nevertheless, there is here also a crucial difference between chess and poker. In chess, complete symbolization is in principle possible and even though the ideal of complete symbolization is in actual play only reached in marginal game situations, a game of chess is still almost exclusively played out in the symbolic order of logic and calculation. In poker, complete control of the game through logical and mathematical calculation is not possible, either in practice or in principle. Even the most sophisticated calculations of probabilities will not eliminate the element of chance in the outcome of the game. And furthermore, when a player uses logic to interpret and anticipate his opponent's move, he cannot, as in chess, model his deductions on the assumption that the opponent is a fully rational player. Poker is played against real people with real human tendencies, flaws, and imperfections. The player has to figure out the exact character of his opponent's playing style, and overestimating the opponent can sometimes be as fatal as underestimating him. Exact logic cannot stand alone. It must be supported by a certain degree of inexact psychological empathy.

The philosophical difference between chess and poker is that in chess, the aim is to close the voids in the symbolic order, whereas in poker, there is recognition that these voids can never be fully closed. In poker there is a fundamental acceptance of imperfection in the symbolization of any game situation, and the aim is to tolerate and sometimes even profit from this imperfection.

Roulette constitutes the diametrical opposite to chess. The roulette player disregards the mathematical symbolization of the game situation. Ignoring the unfavorable statistical odds of his bets, he completely delivers himself to the real dimension of the game in the form of chance. Doing this, the roulette player seems to conjure mystical forces of the universe, defying the strictly rational laws of the symbolic order. This conjuring, rather than winning, may be the actual object of playing roulette.

In poker the blind deliverance to chance constitutes a temptation to be resisted rather than an aim of playing. Nevertheless, few poker players can honestly disclaim any belief in the existence of mystical forces beyond the

stochastic universe of probability theory. Poker is first and foremost a contest with the other players at the table. Parallel to this contest there is, however, also a contest between the individual player and the game itself that has some resemblance to the roulette player's contest with chance. Even though the skilled poker player will generally implement his strategy according to the laws of probability, he is still subject to the thrills and horrors of being, in the singular instance, at the mercy of chance. An important part of poker playing is being able to deal with these emotions and employ them in a productive fashion. The excitement of engaging with chance should be channeled into increasing the player's analytical focus on the game while at the same time not seducing him into pursuing irrational whims of chance. Similarly to the roulette player, the poker player engages in a battle with chance, and this constitutes an important element of the very attraction of both games. What sets the two apart is that while the roulette player enters the battle with nothing more than superstition and blind recklessness, the skilled poker player will be armed for the encounter with mathematics, strategy, and a willingness to take calculated risks.

In Rock-Paper-Scissors, we find an inflation of the role of the imaginary order. The RPS player may collect information to support her decision on whether to throw Rock, Paper, or Scissors in a particular situation against a particular opponent. But the predictive value of any information, whether in the form of physical tells, psychological profiling, or statistical data on the opponent, is highly contingent on the extent to which the player's reading of the opponent is already included in the opponent's display of information. Any symbolization is contingent on the imaginary mediation between the sign and the signified. In RPS, it is paradigmatically illustrated that any system of symbolization is contingent upon the particular way in which the subject's reading the system is included, excluded, or in some way "included out" of the symbolic order.

The functioning of the imaginary order in RPS results in a number of elements in the game that we also find as crucial components of poker: Sicilian reasoning, bluffing, and the importance of reading the opponent as a concrete human individual and not as an idealized perfectly rational idea. The difference between the two games derives from the fact that in poker the hierarchy of hand values does not have the same intransitive or circular structure as in RPS. Furthermore the nature of a hand is in poker not entirely decided by will, as is the case in RPS, but through the random distribution of cards. This means that in poker there is a difference in the real be-
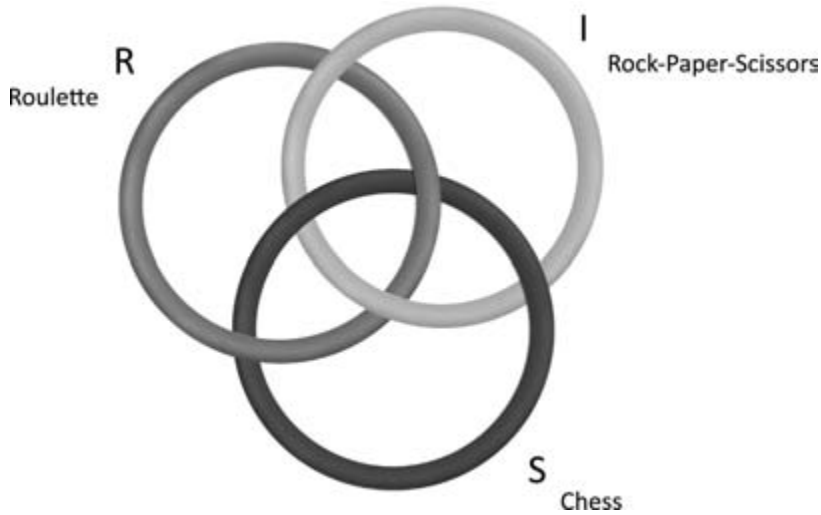
Fig. 2. Borromean Knot of game types

tween players, instituted at the initial deal of cards and further evolved through the subsequent rounds of the hand. Since poker players have exact knowledge about their own cards and the cards on the board, there is room for some degree of exact logical and mathematical analysis. Contrary to RPS, poker players are not entirely delivered to the fantasmatic universe of the imaginary order. Some system of symbolization may be established whereby poker becomes more than a game of pure speculative imagination.

We conclude this chapter by returning to the figure of the Borromean knot. This time we are able to designate the circles not only by the orders of the Lacanian triad of symbolic, real, and imaginary but also by the three games exemplifying the functioning of these orders: chess, roulette, and Rock-Paper-Scissors.

In a game of poker, the outcome of different hands will be determined in different dimensions of this figure. Some hands may be determined through sheer luck (real), some hands may be determined by superior mathematical calculation by one player (symbolic), and some hands may be determined through bluffing or advanced reading of the opponent (imaginary). But if we look at the game of poker over a course of hands, it turns out that the game constantly moves from one order to the other and that

most hands involve a complex interplay between all three orders, the symbolic, the real, and the imaginary. This is why we relate poker to the other games in the figure by placing poker as the whole of the interplay between the three other game elements. This understanding of poker provides the analytical framework for the exploration of the game in the rest of the book.

TWO ♠
♣
♥
♦   Anatomy of a Poker Hand

> [Poker is] a game of fortune to be won by luck, science, and intuitive skill, in a combination unexampled except in life itself.[1]

Rather than one particular game, poker is a family of different games structured around the same basic principles. In this chapter, we shall be looking into No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em, which is the most popular form of poker today. From a philosophical perspective, No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em is arguably distinguished from other variants of poker by having a structure that balances the three ontological orders very well against each other. The game is not primarily a game of chance. It is not primarily a game of mathematical and logical deduction. Nor is it primarily a psychological game. More so than other variants of poker, it is precisely the interplay between these three dimensions that determines the outcome of the game. The game is never entirely determined by one dimension. Perhaps this is the philosophical justification for poker legend Doyle Brunson's designation of Texas Hold 'Em as "the Cadillac of poker games."

The object of the current chapter is to give a brief introduction to the dynamics of poker and poker strategy. This introduction serves as the basis for the following chapter, where we are going to go further into the philosophical analysis of poker by applying the distinction between real, symbolic, and imaginary to the kind of reasoning going into the game.

BASICS OF TEXAS HOLD 'EM

Texas Hold 'Em is played between a number of players typically ranging from two to ten. At the beginning of each hand, every player is dealt two

cards not exposed to the other players. These are the so-called hole cards. The playing of a hand consists of up to four consecutive rounds of dealing and betting. In each betting round, players bet/raise (put money in the pot), call (match a previous bet), check (stay in an unraised pot without betting), or fold (withdraw from the hand without adding further money to the pot). A betting round proceeds until players have either folded or equalized their bets into the pot. If more than one player is still left in the round, the hand proceeds to the next round of dealing and betting. If only one player is left, this player wins the hand and takes the money currently in the pot.

After the first betting round, three cards are dealt faceup on the board. This is called "the flop." After the second round of betting, one further card is dealt faceup. This is "the turn." After the third round of betting, a fifth and final card is dealt faceup. This is "the river." The river card is followed by a fourth and final round of betting, and if more than one player is still left in the pot after this round, the players still in the pot go to showdown and reveal their hole cards. The player showing the strongest poker hand, consisting of any five-card combination of his two hole cards and the five community cards on the board, wins the hand and takes home the money in the pot.

Hand strength is determined according to the standard ranking of poker hands. In descending order: straight flush (five cards of the same suit in consecutive order), four of a kind (four cards of the same rank), full house (three cards of the same rank plus two cards of another rank), flush (five cards of the same suit), straight (five cards in consecutive order), three of a kind (three cards of the same rank), two pairs (two cards of the same rank plus two cards of another rank), pair (two matching cards of the same rank), and high card (the highest-ranking single card of the hand). In case of a tie, the pot is split. There are thus two ways of winning a hand, either showing the strongest hand at showdown or placing a bet in any of the four betting rounds not matched by any of the other players.

Since it is generally considered to be an advantage to be positioned late in the sequence of betting, position is rotated after each hand so that players alternate being first, second, third, and so on in the betting sequence. The last position is referred to as "the dealer's position" or as "being on the button." Furthermore, each hand is initiated by a number of forced bets also known as "blinds" and "antes." These are bets players must place before their cards are dealt as an entry to participate in the hand. The player immediately to the left of the dealer places "the small blind" of some

predefined amount. The player immediately to the left of the small blind places "the big blind" typically amounting to twice the small blind. If the game is played with antes, every player including the blinds places a forced bet of some predefined amount smaller than the small blind. Players, of course, also take turns being in the position of the small and the big blind.

In limit poker, players may only bet in restricted increments up to a certain maximum on each betting round. In no-limit poker, players are allowed in any betting round to bet any fraction of the money they have on the table or even go "all-in" with their entire stack of chips.

An often quoted poker saying goes: "Poker's a day to learn and a lifetime to master." Truly, one of the enchanting charms of poker is the immense contrast between the simplicity of the rules and the overwhelming complexity of the game in practice. It is far beyond the scope of this book, and perhaps of any book, to deliver a complete presentation of the strategic thinking that goes into playing poker. The object here is, instead, to apply our theoretical framework to poker in order to identify the different philosophical dimension in the kind of thinking that goes into playing poker. In the following, we shall be taking as our starting point one particular hand to serve as example. We shall be looking at how the hand proceeds as it is played and undertaking a philosophical analysis of the considerations going into the hand. The hand chosen for illustration was played by professional poker player Gus Hansen in the course of the Aussie Millions Poker Tournament 2007. The hand was crucial in determining the final outcome of the tournament, which Hansen proceeded to win.[2]

PREFLOP: SYMBOLIZING THE STRENGTH OF A POKER HAND

The hand occured toward the end of the tournament when all but 14 out of an initial 746 players had been knocked out. This accounts for the astronomical amount of chips accumulated on the table. Gus Hansen is seated at a table with four other players. His chip stack at this stage is 1.9 million dollars. The small blind is 12,000, the big blind is 24,000, and antes are 4,000, meaning that there is 56,000 in the pot even before the actual betting begins.

Hansen is positioned in the big blind and he is dealt the hole cards:

Hansen

The betting round is initiated by the player to the left of Hansen, who immediately folds, as do the following two players. Left in the pot is now only the player in the small blind, Patrik Antonius, an experienced professional well known to Hansen. Antonius adds another 12,000 to his small blind, calling Hansen's initial forced bet of 24,000. Before we proceed to see how Hansen acts, we shall pause to consider the philosophical coordinates of the situation.

The distribution of cards in a game of poker is completely random, assuming the game is fair. As such we may initially regard the cards as immediate manifestations of the undifferentiated Being of the real. There is no meaningful reason that a player is dealt **J♣ J♠** instead of **A♠ J♠, 10♦ 10♥, K♣ 8♠,** or any other hand. Since very few and certainly only very bad poker players play their cards completely randomly, the cards rarely remain mere manifestations of the real. As soon as a player starts considering how to play her hand, a symbolization of the cards take place, whereby the cards are inscribed into the symbolic order of the game. Basically, playing good poker may be boiled down to being able to judge the strength of your hand at any given time in the game and bet accordingly, that is, symbolize the real. Doyle Brunson puts it this way: "Try to decide how good your hand is at a given moment. Nothing else matters. Nothing!"

Although it is certainly true, we should not be deceived by the simplicity of this statement. As we shall see in the following, "strength" of a poker hand is no straightforward concept. First, it is difficult in most situations to express the strength of a poker hand on a one-dimensional scale. Second, the factors going into estimating the strength of a poker hand are manifold and heterogeneous. The list of possible factors relevant when deciding its strength is almost endless. It includes basic factors such as position and pot odds but also more advanced things such as opponent's style, the player's and the opponent's amounts of chips, the stage in tournament progression, physical tells, the player's own table image, and so on. Brunson's statement may thus be complemented by a paraphrase: "When trying to decide how good your hand is at a given moment, everything matters. Everything!" The difference in skills between different players is often made up by the difference between the amounts of factors the players are able to include in their judgment of a hand's strength.

Theoretically, the strength of a poker hand may be viewed as a conflation of three dimensions of strength: current strength, potential strength, and relative strength. Current strength is the ranking of the poker hand that can be made with the hole cards and any community cards already on the board. Potential strength is measured by the ranking of the

poker hands that may eventually be made when all the cards are out and the probability of these hands being made. Relative strength of a hand is decided in comparison with the strength of the hands of opponents still in the pot. Since opponents' hands are equally subject to development during a hand, it is relevant to consider both current relative strength and potential relative strength.

Going back to our example, the first thing to consider for Hansen is the current strength of the hand. With no cards yet on the board, this is easily determined to be a pair of jacks—a fairly strong hand at this moment, beaten only by queens, kings, or aces. As mentioned, such determination constitutes a symbolization of the real. The real of the randomly dealt cards is valuated through inscription into the symbolic reality of the game. The determination of current hand's strength operates, however, at a very primitive level of symbolization, and at this early stage of the hand, it is obviously insufficient since the showdown value of the hand is contingent on five other cards to come. The five remaining cards constitute a surplus of the real not yet included in the symbolization of the hand in the determination of current strength.

The next level of thinking involves determining the potential strength of the hand. In this case of two jacks, the most obvious possibility of improvement lies in catching another jack to complete three of a kind, also known as a "set." At this stage, the calculation of this probability is fairly simple. With two jacks remaining in the deck and 50 cards still not revealed, the probability of completing a set on the flop is 12 percent, on the flop or the turn 16 percent and on the flop, turn, or river 20 percent. The surplus of the real is included in the symbolization through probability theory. A player does not know which cards are to be dealt as the hand progresses, and he can point to no definite causes that predict the cards. Given his knowledge of the cards in the deck, he can, however, determine the probability of certain cards to be dealt. Through the calculations of probability theory, the manifestations of the real in the form of the random distribution of cards are inscribed into a meaningful and ordered symbolic system of signs. Later in this chapter, we shall be looking further into the philosophical implications of this procedure.

Finally, Hansen also makes some reflections on the relative strength of his hand. At this early stage of the hand, he has very little information from which to deduce the probable content of his opponent's hand. Hansen makes the following assumption:

Even with the very significant ante, I don't think Patrik would limp with total garbage. As a matter of fact I think he has somewhat of a decent holding, since I know that Patrik is very reluctant to get involved in big-stack shoot-outs out of position.[3]

Taking into consideration the size of the pot, Antonius's position and his call and also some general knowledge of Antonius's style, Hansen rules out his opponent having a weak hand or a very strong hand and assumes he is up against a medium strong hand.

Hansen decides that the overall strength of his hand warrants a raise and puts 72,000 in the pot to go with his big blind of 24,000. Hansen's bet is then called by Antonius and both players proceed to the flop.

FLOP AND TURN: THE OPPONENT AND THE IMAGINARY

The pot now contains a total of 212,000 and the flop puts the following cards on the board:

Hansen   Antonius

The first thing to note is of course the jack improving the current strength of Hansen's hand by completing his set. What needs to be decided then is the likelihood of this hand being the strongest at the moment and the probability of the hand being the strongest at showdown. This decision involves considerations of the current relative strength and the potential relative strength of the hand.

One option to take into consideration is that Antonius is holding an ace that gives him a pair of aces in combination with the board. Since he did not show strength preflop it is reasonable to assume that his second card is low or medium value. This would be a fortunate situation for Hansen since Antonius would be left with limited chances of improving into a hand that could beat a set of jacks. Yet the board also opens possibilities for both

straight and flush draws. Say Antonius is holding king-queen, in which case a ten on turn or river would complete a straight to beat Hansen's set. Or he could be holding two hearts with the chance of completing a flush to beat Hansen's set.

As the betting starts again, Antonius checks. Figuring to have the best hand, Hansen's aim is to make Antonius put as much money as possible into the pot. Hansen makes a modest bet of 110,000 in order not to scare his opponent away. The bet is called by Antonius. Hansen's reflections on the move are the following:

> I'm not quite sure what it means, since I thought Patrik was prone to check-raise with a lot of different hands. It feels like the check-calls is more of a mediocre holding. No aces, no flush-draw—bottom pair or a straight-draw seems more likely![4]

The opponent's rather passive move makes Hansen rule out the stronger alternatives of the range of hands he has previously put Antonius on, that is, the ace or the flush draw. In addition to the above-mentioned straight draw, Hansen also includes a low pair in the range of likely hands Antonius could be holding.

Hansen's reflections here on the likely nature of Antonius's hand and thus on the relative strength of Hansen's own hand may also be conceived as an attempt to take into account the real in the determination of the strength of his own hand. Antonius's hole cards constitute a manifestation of the real. Insofar as these cards are unknown to Hansen, the symbolization of his own hand is obviously insufficient. The opponent's hole cards constitute a void in the symbolic order. A key strategic element in poker is to fill this void or at least narrow it down to a minimum, which is done by treating every aspect of the opponent's behavior, from his specific betting action to his general demeanor, as an indication of the nature of his hand. This process of incorporating the real into the symbolic is inevitably mediated by the imaginary. The physical setup of a poker game very obviously illustrates this point. Players and cards are arranged in such a manner that a player can see only the back side of her opponent's cards. Thus direct symbolization is impossible. The only access to the opponent's card goes via the opponent. When looking at an opponent, the player is at the same time looking at the opponent looking at his own cards. And when estimating the likely nature of an opponent's hand, a player is thus trying to imagine what the other player is looking at. This is exactly what Hansen is do-

ing when putting Antonius on a range of hands. We shall be looking at the philosophical implications of this procedure later on.

Going back to the game: there is now 432,000 in the pot. With Hansen having a total of 1.7M chips on the table, and Antonius 1.5 million, the hand could very well be developing into a situation in which the tournament life of both players is at stake. The turn produces the following board:

Hansen

J♣ J♠

9♥ A♣ J♥ Q♠

Antonius

This could be a dangerous card for Hansen since it completes some of the straight draws that were assumed to be within the range of likely holdings of Antonius. Say if Antonius was holding king-ten or ten-eight he would now have a straight. Antonius's first response to the turn is again a modest check. This leaves Hansen with a crucial decision to make. The question is not so much whether to bet or not but rather determining the appropriate size of the bet. Since his reflections provide fruitful insight into the kind of thinking that goes into playing poker, we shall be quoting him at length, even though it probably requires a certain amount of poker knowledge and certainly a familiarity with poker lingo to follow the reasoning in every detail. Hansen reasons:

> Even though the two straights worry me, I don't have to spend too much energy on those ugly scenarios, because if indeed he has made a straight all the money is going into the middle anyway and all I can do is hope for a lucky river-card. No, I have to figure out the best way to deal with all the other possible holdings—the KQ, QJ, JT, T9, and I could go on! Although I kind of discarded the flush-draw and various ace-holdings because of the post-flop action, they are still lurking in the back of my mind, too.
>
> So, what to do? Patrik will have somewhere in between 0–14 outs. Optimal strategy would therefore be to bet an amount that deals beautifully with all the different number of outs. Unfortunately that is ab-

solutely impossible. What is possible is to take an average of his outs, and then make a bet that makes it unprofitable for him to draw. Even though seven outs seems to be the right number, I like to overestimate my opponent's chances when I make my calculations. Eight outs it is! Since I have a general tendency to over-bet, the math is going to be pretty accurate anyway.

So where does that leave me? Well, at this point I have narrowed it down to three bet-size categories:

1. *The small bet:* Betting between 200K and 250K doesn't put a lot of pressure on any kind of draw. Furthermore, it might give me a major headache when facing a large river-bet when an Eight, Ten, King, or heart hits the board. On a positive note it leaves a lot of room for Patrik to check-raise me and probably also keeps most of the drawing-dead hands in the loop. I'm not a big fan, but it has some merit.

2. *The pot-sized bet:* A bet in the 450K range builds a bigger pot, and doesn't give the eight-out drawing hands the proper pot-odds or even implied odds to call. The door is still open for an ingenious check-raise. Even though I might lose Patrik as a customer with this somewhat larger bet, I am not as interested in winning 250K more as I'm worried about a 1.5 million loss. I like this bet size.

3. *The all-in bet:* 1.7 million! Pulling the trigger is often-times my favorite play. No more nonsense, no more worrying about disgusting river bets, just the plain and simple "Do you wanna dance?" puts on ultimate pressure! It doesn't allow anybody to draw out on you unless they are on some kind of suicide mission, and I am fairly certain that Patrik doesn't belong in that category. Last but not least, assuming a fold, taking 210K from my toughest competitor and thereby putting some distance between us is in itself a very satisfying result. On the other hand it fails to win more money against weaker hands as it will scare everything but the premium hands away. It doesn't allow Patrik to attempt any sneaky check-raise bluffs, either. I love the play, but here it seems to come up a tad bit short. My hand is probably too strong for that maneuver.

That is it for all the math, but there is still one factor to consider—Patrik's perception of the whole enchilada. Since Patrik started playing in the Big Game and I started playing online poker at Full Tilt, we have had plenty of chances to play together, giving both of us some insights of each other's strengths and weaknesses. I am certain that Patrik would attach serious strength to an all-in bet on my part—maybe even so

much that he would lay down some very strong hands he would otherwise have chosen to check-raise with given the opportunity. Another indicator that the all-in bet isn't suitable for this specific situation.[5]

The way Hansen analyzes the situation, it raises a dilemma between betting too little, thus making it profitable for Antonius to call in order to get another chance of completing a straight or perhaps even a flush draw, and betting too much, thus forcing Antonius into folding a weak hand from which Hansen could have potentially extracted more money. A key concept in Hansen's considerations is the concept of pot odds.

Pot odds are calculated by comparing the cost of keeping the hand in play until showdown (price of calling) with the expected amount in the pot at showdown. Pot odds are then compared to the odds of a hand being the strongest at showdown (potential strength) in order to see if it is profitable to bet on a drawing hand currently not the strongest. In Hansen's reflections we find the concept of "outs" to express the probability of Antonius completing a drawing hand. If, for a moment, we assume that we know with certainty that Antonius is holding a ten-nine straight draw, there are eight cards left in the deck to complete a winning draw, four kings and four eights. Thus Antonius has eight outs. With 46 cards in the deck before the river, the eight outs represent a probability of 17 percent or about one-to-six odds. If Hansen bets small, say 200,000, he is offering Antonius the chance of winning 632,000 by calling the bet, giving him pot odds of 200 to 632, or one to three. With only one-to-six odds of completing the hand, the bet is not immediately profitable. Since there is one more betting round after the river, Antonius can expect to make Hansen contribute even more to the pot in case he completes his draw. If he expects Hansen to call another bet of 700,000 or more after the river, his so-called implied pot odds jump to 200,000 to 1.3 million, or one to six and a half, thus making the bet profitable.[6] Since Hansen assumes he is holding the strongest hand, his object is to persuade Antonius to make an unprofitable bet. This is why he discards the option of the small bet.

When considering his options, Hansen does not only take into account assumptions about the nature of the opponent's hand but also likely responses from Antonius to his betting options. Antonius's future moves can also be understood as manifestations of the real. Hansen's advance discounting of Antonius's moves is an attempt to inscribe the real into a symbolic order of cause and effect, action and reaction, transforming the spontaneous real into a predictable social action. As was the case when es-

timating the likely range of hands the opponent could be holding, here there is also no direct access to the real. Predicting Antonius's future moves, Hansen has to go via the imaginary. He has to imagine what the situation looks like from Antonius's perspective and which actions would be likely from this perspective. These are the kind of reflections we find in the last paragraph of the quote from Hansen. Tellingly, Hansen opens the last paragraph with the phrase "That is it for all the math . . ." The purely rational and mathematical calculations are insufficient in dealing with the part of the real manifesting itself in the opponent's future responses to Hansen's actions. This insufficiency constitutes yet another void in the symbolic order, and the attempts to fill the void goes via the imaginary order.

Having discarded both options of the small and the all-in bet, Hansen settles on a medium-sized bet of 518,000. The bet is immediately raised all-in by Antonius, and Hansen doesn't hesitate to call the raise.

RIVER: ANSWER OF THE REAL

Since both players are all-in, there is no more betting and both players reveal their hole cards awaiting the decisive river card. This is the board:

Hansen

Antonius

J♣ J♠

A♥ 8♥

9♥ A♣ J♥ Q♠

As it turns out, Hansen's reading of Antonius after the flop was slightly off. Antonius connected heavily on the flop. Not only did he get a flush draw but he also made a pair of aces. If Antonius had played the hand according to its actual strength, he would have bet on the flop. Instead, he disguised the strength of his hand by leaving the initiative to Hansen, slow-playing by just calling and not betting or reraising. In a sense, his strategy worked since he managed to give Hansen a false impression of the hand. Unfortunately for Antonius, his pair of aces is not enough to beat Hansen's set of jacks anyway.

Conversely, Antonius also misread Hansen. Hansen's prolonged delib-

eration on how to bet on the turn made Antonius think that Hansen was considering whether to value-bet an ace with a low card, bluff, or just give up the pot.[7] Since any of the alternatives would imply that Antonius had the strongest hand, he did not hesitate to go all-in when Hansen bet.

With only one card to come, Antonius has 11 outs to complete either a flush or a straight to beat Hansen's set of jacks. Any heart completes a flush, but **Q♥** simultaneously makes a full house for Hansen. Any ten completes a straight, excluding **10♥,** which was already counted as an out for the flush. The 11 outs make Hansen a 75 percent favorite to win the hand and the 3.5M chips in the pot. Fortunately for Hansen the river card is harmless:

Hansen

J♣ J♠

9♥ A♣ J♥ Q♠ 8♣

Antonius

A♥ 8♥

This situation points to a characteristic feature of the game of poker. Even though Hansen's strategy has worked out, and he has played his hand close to optimally and has been elaborate and sophisticated in his methods to minimize the voids in the symbolization of the real, his destiny in the game is still to some extent determined by some element of the real over which he has no control. He may be a 75 percent favorite to win the hand before the final card but that also means he still had a 25 percent chance of losing. Being a statistical favorite may provide some conciliation, but it doesn't take away the thrill of delivering yourself in the last instance to the whims of chance, hoping for a favorable answer of the real.

♣   All You Ever Wanted to Know about Texas
♥   Hold 'Em but Were Afraid to Ask Žižek
♦

As we have seen in the exposition of the particular hand in the previous chapter, there are a number of techniques that go into playing poker, and furthermore the different techniques are at any point in the game woven into each other in a way that makes them difficult to distinguish at the level of practical poker playing. In the following, we shall be moving to a higher level of abstraction in order to extract and unfold the two most important technical dimensions of poker playing: probability theory and opponent reading. We shall also be looking into the philosophical implications and limitations of using these techniques.

THE LAW OF GREAT NUMBERS AND THE FANTASY OF THE LONG RUN

One way in which the real manifests itself in poker is in the form of chance. And one approach to poker is of course to disregard randomness and play the game as if it were a contest of being most favored by destiny, God, or some other force in charge of seemingly random events. In this approach, the player disregards the statistical likelihood of future cards and the holdings of other players since the outcome of the game is somehow predetermined or at least beyond the control of the player. Whether deliberate or not, there is a certain amount of ignorance involved in such a way of playing poker.

Rather than being a positive strategy applied by actual players, in prac-

tice the ignorant approach rather serves as a negative point of reference, from which most players try to move themselves as far as possible. A first technique for moving away from a state of ignorance is probability theory. We have already seen how probability theory is used to calculate the odds of improving hands and to decide if and how to bet in specific game situations. Here we shall be looking further into the ontology of probability theory.

If we look at the emergence of a single card in isolation, say a river card, it is a completely groundless event, and there is no meaningful reason that this particular card and not another should come up at this particular point in the game. The basic operation of probability theory is to turn the random succession of individual card-events into a sequence of signs. When taken together these signs signify an underlying principle of order not immediately visible in the single event.

In Lacan, we find an illustration of the move from the real to the symbolic by means of a small game.[1] This illustration points in the direction of the procedure by which probability theory integrates the chaotic real into the symbolic order. The illustration goes like this: By tossing a coin 10 times, we produce a random sequence of heads and tails. We may get the result shown in table 1.

In the first instance this sequence is a purely chaotic, irregular, and meaningless manifestation of the real. Now we organize the individual tosses into overlapping units of three, that is, (1 ,2, 3), (2, 3, 4), (3, 4, 5) and so on, and these aggregate units are symbolized according to the following rule: (HHH, TTT) = (α); (HTT, THH, TTH, HHT) = (β); (HTH, THT) = (γ). Hereby a new sequence is generated, representing the original sequence of heads and tails, as shown in table 2.

TABLE 1. Sequence of Tosses			TABLE 2. Sequence of Symbolizations		
Toss No.	Heads/Tails		Toss No.	Heads/Tails	Symbolic Chain
1	H		1	H	
2	H		2	H	
3	H		3	H	α
4	T		4	T	β
5	H		5	H	γ
6	H		6	H	β
7	T		7	T	β
8	T		8	T	β
9	H		9	H	β
10	T		10	T	γ

While the outcome in the sequence of individual tosses is of course still completely random, the symbolization has introduced an element of regularity and order in the symbolic chain. Certain successions have been made impossible and others necessary. For instance, γ cannot follow immediately after α since this would imply a shift in the row of tosses from heads to tails or vice versa. And such a shift would generate the unit β between the two other units. Another example is the fact that between two α-units, there must necessarily be an even number of β-units. β symbolizes a shift in the series from heads to tails or vice versa. If there have been three heads in succession, there will have to be 0, 2, 4, 6, and so on such shifts before we can come back to three heads in succession again.

Lacan's point with the model is to show how order and regularity emerge *ex nihilo* from the symbolization of the pure randomness of the real, even though the symbolization might initially appear to be an "innocent" recording of real events. This is comparable to the introduction of order into chaos through the symbolization and aggregation procedures of probability theory.

The foundation of probability theory is Poisson's Law of Great Numbers, asserting that random events are normally distributed. This means that on an aggregate level, the distribution of comparable random events approaches a certain average. The assumption of normal distribution makes possible the calculation of probabilities of different outcomes of future events.

Probability theory introduces order into chaos, and hence the historical emergence of the theory is also referred to as "the taming of chance."[2] In other words, the calculation of probabilities constitutes a symbolization of the real by which it becomes possible to make rational decisions facing otherwise unpredictable events.

In addition, in the case of probability theory, Žižek's assertion that any symbolization is incomplete holds true. It is crucial to note that the Law of Great Numbers is precisely that: a law of *great* and not *small* numbers. Only at the aggregate level does the sequence of events represent a principle of order. Only at the aggregate level is chance tamed. The singular event remains, however, unorderly, untamed, and "lawless." Historian Thomas M. Kavanagh summarizes the limitation of probability theory:

> The theory of probability does offer a response to chance, does generate a distinct scientific enterprise. It is able to do so, however, only by first relinquishing any claim it might make to speak of what, from the viewpoint of the player, the gambler, the person awaiting the outcome of the chance event, is most crucial: the present moment, what will actually happen next, the specific event. As a science of chance, probabil-

ity theory may speak of the real; but is does so only by first stepping outside the real, by adopting as its vantage point a distant, removed position excluding all real involvement with any one outcome as opposed to another. The reality about which probability theory speaks is always an abstracted real without compelling pertinence to any specific moment or situation.[3]

The singular event thus constitutes a surplus of the real not contained by symbolization. The singular event marks the limitation of probability theory.

As we have seen, systems of symbolization are supported by fantasies in the order of the imaginary that function to make the process of symbolization work despite its inherent limitations. In the case of probability theory, this function is performed by what we might call the "Fantasy of the Long Run." According to the Law of Great Numbers, the normal distribution of random events will eventually carry itself through after a great number of events. This translates into poker in that the distribution of cards will even out over the course of a greater number of hands.

In the face of a bad run of cards, the seemingly unlucky poker player should comfort himself with the thought that if he just keeps playing, the cards are bound to come his way again. The notion of "the long run" thus takes on the shape of an imaginary future state in which good luck and bad luck even out and a kind of mathematical justice shall prevail. Paradoxically, it is impossible at any particular moment to determine at which point in the course of a long run a player is situated. It makes no sense to say that he is "at the beginning," "in the middle," or "close to the completion" of a certain long run. Like the treasure at the end of the rainbow, "the long run" functions as an imaginary idea that is never actualized but nevertheless functions as a regulative principle for current actions.

In part 3, we shall be looking into the subjective implications of following the Law of Great Numbers and the existential difficulties in retaining belief in the Fantasy of the Long Run. For now, it suffices to note that even the taming of chance by probability does not neutralize the real entirely. Paraphrasing Kierkegaard. we may conclude that "poker must be understood in the long run but is always played in the short run."

READING THE OPPONENT

A man's *true* feelings come out in a Poker game.[4]

Besides the unpredictability of the singular event, there is another type of limitation to decisions based on probabilities in poker. Since poker is a

game of imperfect information, players are constantly forced to make moves in situations where they lack crucial knowledge about their opponents' holdings. We have already touched upon this in relation to the estimate of relative strength of a hand. In order to compensate for their lack of knowledge, players form imaginary ideas of their opponents' holdings. In poker parlance, this is known as "reading" your opponent.

In general usage, the term "reading" refers to a kind of practice in which some signifying entity is understood through the way it refers to something else. We see a road sign with the picture of a cow and we understand this sign as referring to the risk of cows crossing the road. Or we read a book and the experience of a story is conveyed through the signifying functions of the words and sentences in the book. In poker, players engage in reading their opponents by interpreting their actions and demeanor as signs of the cards they are holding or the strategy they intend to apply to the game situation. In live poker, the physical demeanor of players may indeed reveal important information about their cards: the trembling of a hand may indicate that the player is holding good cards; a continued staring at the board after the flop may indicate that the player did not get the cards he was hoping for, and casually throwing money into the pot when betting may indicate that the player is bluffing. However, the importance of such physical tells should not be overestimated. By far, the most important source of information in reading an opponent is his actual betting action. Poker author Al Alvarez points to the connection between money and language:

> Chips are not just a way of keeping score; they combine with the cards to form the very language of the game. What you do with your chips—how and when you bet or check or raise—is a way of communicating with your opponents. You ask subtle questions with your chips. . . . The questions you ask and the answers you receive may be misleading—a gigantic bet may be a sign of weakness, an attempt to drive the other players out of the pot because you do not have the hand you purport to have—but the combination of cards and money and position at the table creates a complex pattern of information (or illusion) that controls the flow of the game. In poker, betting and what is called "money management" are as much an art as reading the cards and judging the probabilities.[5]

The nature of the signifying function of language is of course a great philosophical question, and it is safe to say that no consensus on the issue has

been achieved yet, and most likely none ever will be. Instead, there is a range of alternative positions on the question.

In one school of thought, the primary function of language is conceived as the representation of facts. We may call this the *positivist* school.[6] In another school of thought the function of representation is downplayed or perhaps even seen as illusory since language-practice itself constructs the reality that it purports to speak about. Instead, the use of language is governed by historical language-immanent conditions of possibility that render some statements possible and others impossible and in effect structure our entire perception of the world. This position may be called *constructivist*.[7] In a third school of thought, language is seen not only to construct but to distort our perception of reality and conceal fundamental features of the world, whether they be political, social, or psychological. This approach to language may be called *ideology-critique*.[8]

These are just three examples of different approaches to the nature and function of language. The point here is not to give an exhaustive list of theories of language, nor to resolve the theoretical controversies between the different positions. Instead, the idea that a whole range of different theories of language apply simultaneously to poker shall be proposed. Different theories of language give primacy to different functions of language. In poker, a range of different signifying functions intersects in a player's betting actions and thus also in the reading of an opponent's betting.

Let us imagine a situation where a player in the dealer's position is facing a bet before the flop of three times the big blind from an opponent in first position. How should the player read this bet? The first and most obvious option is to treat the bet as a straightforward representation of a hand of reasonable strength. The opponent is in an early disadvantageous betting position and the bet is of moderate size so it seems reasonable to assume he has a hand to support his bet. Engaging in this kind of thinking about a particular bet in terms of the actual hand(s) it may represent corresponds to a theory of language as representative for facts in the language-external world. This does not necessarily preclude the possibility of misrepresentation as in the case of bluffing. However, the meaning of the bet as a sign is reduced to whether or not it corresponds to an "objective" fact, that is, to the strength of the hand. This can be illuminated by invoking the positivist notion of language that we find, for instance, in the early works of Wittgenstein.

In Wittgenstein's first major work, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1918), he states that a "proposition is a picture of reality" and thus "[t]he sense of

a proposition is its agreement and disagreement with the possibilities of the existence and non-existence of the atomic facts," and furthermore "[t]he truth-possibilities of the elementary propositions mean the possibilities of the existence and non-existence of the atomic facts."[9] This means that a proposition not claiming to state a fact is basically meaningless, and the truth-value of a meaningful proposition is contingent upon the existence or nonexistence of the fact to which it is referring.

When a particular bet is interpreted solely with the purpose of determining the strength of a particular hand, the meaning of the bet lies solely in its signifying function in relation to that particular hand, that is, the "atomic fact" of the hand. Of interest is only the truth-value of the bet in relation to the hand, that is, whether the bet is a true representation of a strong hand or a misrepresenting bluff.

Most poker players above a certain level, however, pay attention to more than their opponents' betting actions as representations or misrepresentations of card holdings. A particular bet is part of a more general pattern. It is a particular manifestation of the bettor's general style of playing. Thus a skilled poker player will note his opponent's betting actions over time in order not only to estimate the strength of a hand in a particular situation but also to get an idea of the opponent's playing style. Observing the opponent's betting action over the course of a game session or perhaps several game sessions, the skilled player will be able to detect certain patterns and thus make a characterization of the opponent.

Distinctions commonly applied in the characterization of players are tight/loose and aggressive/passive.[10] Loose players bet and call with a wide range of hands before the flop as compared to tight players, who will generally only engage in a pot when they hold a strong hand. Aggressive players tend to either fold or bet as a hand develops, applying a kind of all-or-nothing strategy, whereas passive players are more hesitant and tend to check and call more, leaving the initiative to their opponents. These distinctions combine into the categories tight-passive, tight-aggressive, loose-passive, loose-aggressive. A tight-aggressive player is, for instance, a player who will only engage in a pot if he has strong hole cards, but once he does engage in a pot, he tends to bet and raise on the hand. A loose-passive player, on the other hand, will play a large number of his hands, but he will tend to check and call his hands and wait to see how the hand develops.

Reading opponents in order not only to determine the strength of their particular hands but also to form an idea of the general style of play com-

pares to the shift in the notion of language that Wittgenstein performed as he wrote his second major work, *Philosophical Investigations* (1945). This may be crudely conceived as a shift from positivism to constructivism. In critical dialogue with his own previous work, the later Wittgenstein presents a more nuanced notion of language in which the representation of facts is just one among a wide range of functions performed by language.[11] Furthermore, the use of language cannot be reduced to logic as was claimed in his earlier work. We have already seen how Wittgenstein invokes the metaphor of "language game" to present a theory of language as governed by culturally and historically contingent rules, the so-called grammar.

If we adopt the later Wittgenstein's notion of language, the meaning of a sentence cannot be reduced to its reference to an objective fact. Studying a greater number of utterances in a given social environment, we will gradually be able to deduce the rules of the language games played in this context. This will give an insight into the norms, conventions, beliefs, and so on inherent in that social environment. When applied in academic studies, this kind of investigation is often referred to as discourse analysis.

When poker players observe their opponents in order to detect patterns in their betting actions, they also engage in a kind of discourse analysis. They are not only interested in the individual bet as indication of the "atomic fact" of a particular hand value, but also in the regularities constituted through a series of bets. The advanced poker player thus reads his opponent in order to detect the "grammar" of the opponent's betting action, which may crudely be expressed by the distinctions tight/loose and passive/aggressive.

As the player gets a more and more precise idea of his opponent's playing style, he will also be able to make more precise reads with regard to the individual bets. Knowing the opponent's "grammar," he is better equipped to determine the precise meaning of the individual bet in regards to the possible hand or hand range it may represent. So the second level of opponent reading is basically a refinement of the first level of reading.[12] If the player in the preceding example has already determined his opponent is a tight-passive player, he may be justified in making an even more precise estimate of the opponent's likely hand range and the meaning of the bet of three times the big blind. The player may thus assume that the opponent is holding something like either a pair of tens through aces, an ace with king or queen kicker or perhaps suited connectors above ten-jack. If, however,

he knows the opponent as a loose-aggressive type, he may interpret the bet as representing only a mediocre holding, and he may perhaps include the possibility of a bluff in his assumptions.

Once you move beyond a certain level of poker, greater accuracy in the reading of opponents is what makes the difference between the good players who lose and the better players who win. Mediating between the two levels of reading described above is what sharpens this accuracy in reading.

Before we proceed with the third approach to language, the ideology-critique and its application in poker, we shall be making a detour into a discussion of game theory and poker, in order to see why poker players inevitably have to engage in this third dimension of signification.

"THERE IS NO METALANGUAGE"

> Game theory is a simplified world, like physics without air resistance, or efficient markets finance. There are deep insights that can be gained this way, but you cannot let the simple models blind you. There is air resistance in the world. If you're dropping cannonballs off the leaning tower of Pisa, you can ignore it. If you are parachuting, particularly into a poker game, you cannot.[13]

A very characteristic feature of poker is that although there are certainly several bad ways of playing poker that are most certainly going to make you lose, there is no one optimal strategy for winning the game. This makes opponent reading a potentially very complicated and risky affair.

In chess, reading the opponent is not nearly as complicated as in poker. When considering different move options in chess, a player will certainly try to imagine and anticipate possible countermoves by her opponent. In doing so, the player is, however, well served by working with an idealized image of the opponent as a perfectly rational player. Even playing against an amateur player, it is no bad strategy to try to imagine how the world champion of chess would respond to the different moves under consideration.

Contrary to poker, chess is a game of perfect information. This means that complete information of the game state is available to both players at any moment of the game. In their seminal work on game theory, Neumann and Morgenstern demonstrated that there exists in any game of perfect information a definite value of every possible move and thus also a definite best strategy for the game.[14] Thus for every possible situation in a chess

game, it is theoretically possible to calculate the most optimal move leading to the most favorable outcome of the game. Of course the calculation of the most optimal move is limited by the calculative capacity available either in the form of human intellect or brute computer power.

When the optimal move is calculated, it is assumed that the opponent responds by making that particular move which is for him optimal. But even if the opponent is overestimated and does not respond optimally to the player's move, this only adds to the player's advantage since the possibility of the suboptimal countermove made by the opponent was already included in the calculation of the optimal move. In principle, we can imagine that if two perfect players were to play against each other (God playing with himself, two infinitely powerful computers playing against each other, or perhaps even God playing against an infinitely powerful computer), the game would be determined before the first move since the course of optimal moves and countermoves could be calculated in advance.[15] In a game between a perfect player and an imperfect player, the imperfect player would be "punished" every time he deviated from optimal play. And, in actual play between imperfect fallible human beings, chess may be conceived as a contest of being able to deviate the least in actual play from the ideal optimal play and thus exploit the other player's deviations from the ideal.

Neumann and Morgenstern sums up the implications of grounding strategy on the assumption of the opponent being perfectly rational:

> It is possible to argue that in a zero-sum two-person game the rationality of the opponent can be assumed, because the irrationality of this opponent can never harm a player. Indeed, since there are only two players and since the sum is zero, every loss which the opponent—irrationally—inflicts upon himself, necessarily causes an equal gain to the other player.[16]

Neumann and Morgenstern also extend their theory to games of imperfect information, and they come up with a calculus for optimal play in poker including a mathematical proof of the rationality of bluffing. Again they arrive at the conclusion that it is in principle possible to calculate an optimal strategy also for a game of imperfect information such as poker. There are, however, a number of limitations to the game-theoretical approach to poker suggested by Neumann and Morgenstern that are crucial to our philosophical understanding of poker.

First, in chess there is perfect continuity between optimal strategy and optimal move. The optimal strategy prescribes a specific optimal move in

a given situation. In contrast, optimal strategies in poker, as suggested by game theory, do not prescribe specific moves in specific situations. The optimal strategy consists rather of a mixed distribution of different moves to be applied in a given situation with different probabilities. For instance, if a player holds a medium hand in a certain situation, he should bet with a frequency of x percent, call with a frequency of y percent, and fold with a frequency of z percent. Optimal strategies in games of perfect information, such as chess, are thus pure strategies, while optimal strategies in games of imperfect information, such as poker, constitute mixed strategies.[17] An element of randomness is introduced into the game-theoretical strategy of poker that constitutes a gap between the optimal strategy and the optimal move. Contrary to chess, optimal play in poker does not guarantee victory in every game but will statistically provide an average win in the long run insofar as the opponent plays suboptimally.

Second, the game theoretically optimal strategy for poker is a so-called mini-max strategy. The strategy aims not to extract the maximum money from the opponent but rather to minimize the opponent's maximum win from the player. The calculus works from a kind of worst-case scenario, whereby it is assumed that the opponent has found out the player's strategy, and the calculus then seeks to arrive at that particular strategy which would, even under these circumstances, be least exploitable by the opponent, that is, would minimize the opponent's maximum potential win. As Neumann and Morgenstern note, while such mini-max strategies "are perfect from the defensive point of view, they will (in general) not get the maximum out of the opponent's (possible) mistakes—that is, they are not calculated for the offensive."[18]

In chess, as I have mentioned, it is unproblematic to underestimate the opponent's skills. If a player sticks to optimal play, his opponent will be punished every time the opponent deviates from optimal play. In a poker game, however, where one player plays according to game-theoretical optimal play, his opponent will surely be punished by suboptimal play, but the punishment is perhaps not as fierce as it would have been, had the player adopted another strategy deviating from the game theoretically optimal.

Third, the game theory of poker developed by Neumann and Morgenstern is based on analysis of a very simplified form of poker in which there are only two players, betting is restricted to "high" and "low," there is only one round of betting, and no further cards are added to a hand during a play, thus making the hand static after the initial deal. Yet the crucial question is to what extent their result may be generalized to the more complex

forms of poker that we see in actual poker playing. Several attempts have been made to apply game theory to more complex forms of poker. The most ambitious and comprehensive work on the subject to date is Chen and Ankenman's *The Mathematics of Poker* (2006). The book is certainly rich with insights that may undoubtedly be applied profitably to actual poker playing. But when it comes to bridging the gap between simplified models of game theory and real-life poker games, and providing a full-scale mathematically optimal strategy for actual play, the authors admit to the limitation of their ambition:

> The problem that arises when trying to play using game theory is that we don't have optimal strategies to the common and popular poker games. In fact, in multiplayer scenarios, no such strategies exist.[19]

These three limitations to the game-theoretical approach to poker amount to a number of problems when applied to real-life games. We shall be looking at the problems, which are most interesting from our philosophical point of view.

In chess, you either win, draw, or lose. In poker, the object and result of a game are rarely this unequivocal. Most poker players who engage in a cash game are not concerned only with winning money. They are also concerned with winning the most money in the shortest amount of time. This is why playing a defensive mini-max strategy, as game theory suggests, waiting for the opponent to make mistakes that will cost her money in the long run is not always, from a practical point of view, the most optimal strategy. If the opponent is a weak player, making obvious mistakes, for instance bluffing too much, it is often better for the player to deviate from the theoretically optimal mini-max strategy in order to adopt an exploitative strategy that makes the most of the opponent's mistakes. This will allow the player to extract the maximum amount of money before the opponent gets up and leaves the table with whatever he has got left. Instead of relying on a steady profit in the long run, the exploitative player opts for the maximum gain in the reasonably shortest run possible. The difference between *exploitative* and *optimal* strategy is indeed elaborated by Chen and Ankenman, and exploitative play against weaker opponents and optimal strategy against equal or stronger opponents is generally recommended.[20] The problem is, however, that neither game theory nor any other theory will give you a conclusive answer as to whether you are facing an opponent weaker or stronger than yourself.

Furthermore, game theory is developed as a theory of two-player

games, whereas most actual poker games are played as multiplayer games. This further emphasizes the importance of occasionally deviating from the optimal defensive mini-max strategy in order to exploit weak opponents. If one or two players at a table are particularly weak, it is important to make the most of their mistakes. If one player refrains from doing this, opting for the security of his mini-max strategy, he can be certain that other strong players at the table will take advantage of the golden opportunities before them.

Finally, one of the main objectives in the game theory of poker is to construct a strategy that reveals to the opponent the least amount of information about the range of hands the player might be holding. A key aspect of the mini-max strategy is in this respect the notion of randomized bluffing. In order to add deception to the strategy, a certain frequency of bluffing is included in the strategy, and the decision of whether to bluff or not in a given situation is then decided by some kind of chance mechanism.[21]

The problem with this approach is, however, that it overlooks the fact that it is sometimes a potent strategy not only to hide information from the opponent leaving him in uncertainty about the nature of an actual hand but instead precisely to convey information to the opponent in order to induce certainty in him. This is the case when a player generates in his opponent a certainty that later turns out to be based on wrong assumptions, that is, when the player succeeds in making his opponent believe he is bluffing when the player is actually holding a strong hand. The player is not satisfied with the opponent's *not knowing* the actual nature of the hand. The player, instead, wants the opponent to (falsely) *think he knows* the actual nature of the hand. In order to generate such false certainty in the opponent, it is not enough to distribute a certain amount of bluffs randomly among the different moves of the strategy. Instead, bluffs have to be applied with accuracy in very specific situations involving very specific opponents. Poker theorist Aaron Brown notes: "It is a terrible idea in poker to select the time to bluff at random—that is, to use a random-number generator to decide what to do each time you get into the situation. Selecting when to bluff is where game theory leaves off and the game begins."[22]

The argument of this critical discussion of game theory is that there is no optimal strategy for actual poker playing. This means that even though we may be able to point out a lot of very bad poker strategies, there is no one exclusive good strategy. In Wittgensteinian terms, there are a number of competing grammars and no way of a priori determining which one is the most optimal in a particular game setting. And in Žižekian terms, we

are back to the inevitable aporia of any order of symbolization and the in-sufficiency of any system of signification. This translates into a fundamental uncertainty in the reading of an opponent.

There is no universal grammar of poker that allows unambiguous interpretation of specific betting actions. In some situations, a player may be able to interpret the meaning of an opponent's bet with some amount of certainty. The player may support his immediate interpretation by careful analysis of the opponent's previous play but there is still an inevitable element of uncertainty in any reading of an opponent. This uncertainty is compensated by the player's imagination. The player imagines what the game looks like from the opponent's perspective.

The game-theoretical approach to poker attempts to reduce this imaginative dimension of poker playing into a matter of pure calculation, to be solved solely within the order of the symbolic. By assuming that the opponent is fully rational and has complete knowledge of the player's strategy, game theory attributes a kind of "metalanguage" to the opponent, responding to his actions as if they were part of a fully rational optimal strategy. Thus, any uncertainty regarding the opponent's particular playing style, the opponent's particular grammar for signifying his hand, can be disregarded under the assumption that any deviation from optimal play is going to disadvantage the opponent anyway, as long as the player himself only stays in accordance with optimal play. We can also say that game theory idealizes the opponent into the position of the Big Other, the all-knowing fully rational subject.

However, the well-known Lacanian slogans tells us that "There is no metalanguage" and "There is no Other of the [Big] Other,"[23] meaning exactly that any signification is a partial and contingent symbolization. As we have seen through the limitations of game theory, this also holds true for poker. Instead, the notion of an optimal strategy of poker is in itself an imaginative fantasy. Engaging in poker playing means engaging in imaginative assumptions about the other players, whether you like it or not.

TRAVERSING THE OPPONENT'S FANTASY

Imagining how an opponent perceives of a particular game situation involves not only assumptions about the cards he is holding, that is, his particular symbolization of the real, but also about the opponent's imagination of the player himself. This means that not only is the player's reading of the opponent uncertain because of the contingency of the opponent's style of

playing, the grammar of his signification, there is also the possibility that the player's gaze at the opponent's move is already included in the opponent's move. The meaning of a move is not only a two-dimensional operation where the signification of the strength of the hand intersects with the particular playing style of the opponent. It is rather a three-dimensional operation since the meaning of the opponent's move may also lie in the very staging for the gaze of the player.

Exploring the tale of *The Appointment in Samarra*, we have already seen how the interplay between the staging and the gaze works in the case of RPS. The question of whether your gaze is included in the act is also a question crucial to poker playing. The meaning of a certain move or even a whole series of moves in poker may be, precisely, to generate a specific image in the minds of the other players. The obvious example is, of course, the kind of misrepresentation intended by the bluff or the slow-play. Recollecting the distinction between the two levels of signification identified through the early and the later Wittgenstein, we may distinguish between two kinds of bluffing: tactical and strategic bluffing.[24]

Tactical bluffing operates within the short-term frame of the individual hand, and the object of the move is to get an immediate payment not justified by the actual hand strength through the misrepresentation of a weak hand. This kind of bluffing operates in the dimension of signification delineated through the early Wittgenstein. The bluff is a statement claiming to state a fact concerning the underlying hand value, and the meaning of the statement lies in its truth-value regarding the actual hand value. A player looking at such a move by his opponent is faced with the simple question of whether the opponent is "telling the truth" or whether he is "lying." Tactical bluffing is a very simple form of bluffing, and even novice players soon experience the exhilarating feeling of power of pulling off a successful tactical bluff when they start playing poker.

When moving to more advanced levels of poker, we find also another form of bluffing, the more sophisticated strategic bluffing. Strategic bluffing is not so much concerned with generating a false image of the value of a particular hand. Strategic bluffing is rather concerned with generating a specific image of the player's general style of playing. During a specific sequence of a game, a player may play very loose, betting on a wide range of hands, raising aggressively in certain situations, making himself get caught bluffing (tactically), and exhibiting his cards to the other players when he does pull off a successful (tactical) bluff.

Provided he is playing against attentive and fairly skilled opponents, they will gradually pick up on his betting pattern and categorize him as a loose player. Once this image is generated, the first part of the strategic bluff is completed. Now the player will shift his style of playing and play only strong hands. Because of his table image, the opponents will still be reading his betting action as that of a loose player, and they will play back at him and give him action, even when he is betting aggressively with his strong hands, as they regard the chances of him bluffing tactically to be relatively large. If the strategic bluff works, the costs of building up the image as a loose player will be compensated as the player is now able to lure his opponents into betting big in situations when the player is actually holding the winning hand.

An example of strategic bluffing is provided by a hand played by the legendary Jack Straus in a high-stakes cash game against Jesse Alto.[25] Jesse Alto starts by raising the opening bet with K 8 and then calls when reraised by Straus. With only Alto and Straus left in the pot, the flop brings king, ten, eight of different suits.

Slow-playing his hand, Alto checks and Straus makes a moderate bet — considering the standards of the game—of $1,000. Figuring he has successfully trapped Straus, Alto raises $5,000. After a long period of thinking and watching his opponent, Straus reraises $50,000, setting Alto in for all his money. Alto contemplates the alternatives. Is Straus holding a king and an ace in the hole? Does he have two pairs like Alto himself? Does he have a set with kings, tens, or eights in the hole? Is he on a draw with queen-jack in the hole? Or is Straus simply living up to his reputation of being the master of bluff? Alto decides to call and since he is all-in, the rest of the cards are dealt with no more betting. Straus turns over a pair of tens, completing a set, and his hand holds up when the turn brings a seven and the river a four.

Alto   Straus

To understand the course of the hand, it should be noted that in the previous hour of playing, Straus had bet twice in precisely the same pattern but with far weaker cards. Both times Alto had called him and won but for much smaller amounts. In hindsight, it turns out that Straus's losing bets in the previous hands were only means to build up a certain image to put the play on Alto that was executed in the final hand.

Strategic bluffing operates in the dimension of signification delineated through the later Wittgenstein. The player first speaks in one language in order for the opponents to put him on a certain "grammar." Then suddenly he switches language, but the opponents will keep reading him within the grammar that they initially put him on. The meaning of the player's betting action, insofar as it is part of a strategic bluff, lies not in the actual representation or misrepresentation of an actual hand but rather on the level of the general playing style of which the betting appears to be a manifestation.

With the possibility of bluffing, tactical as well as strategic, a dimension is added to the game of poker that can be compared to the ideological function of language. This function is at the heart of Žižek's understanding of language and signification. With Žižek, there is no reason to discard the theories of language in the early and the late Wittgenstein, either in our understanding of poker or in our understanding of language in general. If we say that language has both the ability to represent the world outside of language and the ability to construct the world according to its own inherent principles, Žižek's thinking may be regarded as a theory of the oscillation between these two seemingly contradictory functions of language and a theory of how they work together in constituting the reality we live in. The reconciliation of these two functions of language is what Žižek terms ideology. "'Ideology' is the 'self-evident' surface structure whose function is to conceal the underlying 'unbalanced,' 'uncanny' structure."[26]

In poker, the player is constantly faced with the insufficiency and un-

certainty of his symbolization of the situation. Not only does he constantly lack knowledge to make completely informed decisions, but even the knowledge he does have is imbued with uncertainty. The underlying structure of a game of poker is thus highly "unbalanced" and highly "uncanny." As we have seen, many of the techniques involved in poker playing are about extending the range of the system of symbolization to reach a higher degree of mastery of the real, whether it be in the form of the randomly dealt future cards, the unknown cards of the opponent or the unpredictable future acts of the opponent. We can describe these as techniques for minimizing the "uncanniness" of the game.

Except in a few marginal game situations, these techniques rarely bring about full symbolization unequivocally prescribing a certain move in the game. Thus players will compensate for their lack of knowledge through imaginary fantasies about the things that they don't know. Or perhaps the things that they think they know will be constituted by an interweaving of things they know and things they imagine.

The compensation for lack of knowledge through fantasy provides ground for skilled players to manipulate the imagination of opponents. This is when poker truly reveals itself as also an ideological struggle. When reading his opponent, the advanced poker player not only engages in a logical deductive analysis of the play of the current hand and a pattern detective analysis of the play of a series of hands, he also includes in his reading the opponent's analysis of the player himself and the opponent's imagination of the weak spots of the player's strategy. This is what happens in strategic bluffing. When for instance a player continuously shows his cards in triumph after a successful bluff or lets himself get caught in an unsuccessful bluff, he supports the opponent's imagination of him as being a loose player. And once a certain image of the player has been built up in the opponent, corresponding to a certain fantasy about how the opponent may exploit the player, the player may turn the tables around to take advantage of this, the opponent's fantasy. In the example here, this would amount to the player getting heavy betting action from his opponents in a situation where the player does indeed have a strong hand.

At this level of the game, players engage with the fantasmatic dimension of the game. First, they engage in a critical analysis of the opponent's system of symbolization and the fantasies supporting that particular system. They identify the voids of the opponent's symbolic system and how these voids are filled by fantasy. Second, they engage in filling these voids

in a way that will steer the whole system in a certain direction. And third, they take advantage of the situation by a move that may in Žižekian terms be called "traversing the fantasy of the opponent."

According to Žižek, "Fantasy designates precisely this unwritten framework which tells us how we are to understand the letter of the Law."[27] If we translate this into poker, it means that the fundamental condition of imperfect information in the game makes it impossible to deduce unequivocally the best move from the laws of logic or statistics. Fantasy, then, is what bridges the gap between these universal laws of logic or statistics and the particular moves to be made in the actual play of the game. Žižek continues from the above and says "that—sometimes, at least—the truly subversive thing is not to disregard the explicit letter of Law on behalf of the underlying fantasies, but to *stick to this letter against the fantasy which sustains it.*"[28] The tactical bluff may be regarded as an immediate transgression of the laws of logic, that is, the law telling you to bet with a strong hand. The strategic bluff, however, sets up a fantasmatic framework for the understanding of the player's moves and at the appropriate moment, the player may cash in precisely by "sticking to the letter of the law," that is, going against this fantasy, which the opponent has by now incorporated in his image of the player, by playing a hand straightforwardly as "the law" prescribes.

An often quoted poker saying goes like this: "If you can't spot the sucker in the first half hour at the table, then you are the sucker." The approach to poker expressed in the saying is that you win a game of poker by taking advantage of other players' mistakes, and if none of your opponents at the table are making obvious mistakes, you are likely the one paying for the other's feast. Poker theorist Aaron Brown, however, takes this saying to the next level of poker playing: "Most con games are organized to make the victim think that someone else is a sucker. So if you think you know who the sucker is, you're most likely being conned."[29] In the approach expressed in this saying, poker games are not won just by waiting for the opponents' mistakes but by actively inducing opponents to make mistakes. In the first saying, the player is advised to gaze carefully at the opponents in order to determine who the sucker is. In the second saying, the player is advised to also gaze critically at his own gaze at the opponents, which may be a gaze intentionally induced in him by the opponents.

The strategy at work here is illustrated by the story about the appointment in Samarra. Curiously, Death does not just finish off the servant at the first encounter in the marketplace. Instead, Death opts for the more spec-

tacular move of making the servant complicit in the execution of his own fatal destiny. The Žižekian point to be made of this is that ideology does not work by brainwashing people into ignorant compliant beings obeying the law. Instead, ideology works by acknowledging people as reflexive and critical beings, encouraging them to transgress the law in the exact way that functions to support the law. Advanced poker playing is not only about knowing the laws of the game but also mastering the ideological space of the game in order for the opponent's moves to be turned against him.

Brown, quoted above, advocates a kind of judo strategy in poker where "the trick is to use the other person's momentum against him," but he also goes on to warn:

> Of course, he [the opponent] could be trying to do the same things to me. If he stays one step ahead, or gets me playing by emotion instead of logic, or just keeps me off balance, he's going to win. One of us will win and one will lose, and the luck of the cards has nothing to do with it. There's no neat mathematical way to decide who will win, and there's no way to calculate the risk. That's the essential nature of games—good games, anyway—and it's entirely missing from game theory. Everyone was born knowing this; it took mathematics to confuse people.[30]

There are of course many more aspects to poker playing and poker strategy than what we have been able to cover in the previous two chapters. The aim has been, nevertheless, to give a general outline of the philosophical dimensions of the kind of thinking that goes into poker playing. The crucial point, which has been repeatedly pointed out from different perspectives, is that except in a few marginal game situations, the various techniques for mastering the game all fall short of providing the player with exact knowledge of what to do.

If we adopt Žižek's view on language and knowledge, this predicament of poker strategy is shared with social life in general insofar as language structures our being in society. As social beings, we always rely on insufficient and aporic symbolizations of the real. The impossibility of grasping the real entirely is a fundamental existential condition. Here is how Žižek summarizes the predicament of the symbolic order, here referred to as the big Other:

> The big Other, the symbolic order itself, is . . . *barré*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack. Without this lack in the Other, the Other would be a closed structure and the only possibility open to the subject

would be his radical alienation in the Other. So it is precisely this lack in the Other which enables the subject to achieve a kind of "de-alienation" called by Lacan *separation:* not in the sense that the subject experiences that now he is separated for ever from the object by the barrier of language, but that *the object is separated from the Other itself*, that the Other itself "hasn't got it," hasn't got the final answer—that is to say, is in itself blocked, desiring; that there is also a desire of the Other. This lack in the Other gives the subject—so to speak—a breathing space, it enables him to avoid the total alienation in the signifier not by filling out his lack but by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack with the lack in the Other.[31]

If there were an optimal poker strategy, poker playing would amount to a contest of players' conformity to such a strategy. Conforming completely to the ideal strategy would then amount to the kind of "radical alienation in the Other" that Žižek is here referring to. The ideal optimal player would be a player able to suspend his individuality and become a mere medium of the execution of the predefined strategy. The ideal optimal player would be a machine.

The alluring charm of poker lies, however, in the absence of an optimal strategy; not just the practical absence due to limited analytical and calculative capacity but the absence even of the possibility of an optimal strategy. This corresponds to Žižek's remark in that even "the Other itself 'hasn't got it,' hasn't got the final answer." The big Other of exact calculation hasn't got it. This "lack in the Other" invites the player to incorporate his individuality and spontaneity into the way he is playing the game. There is a gap between knowledge and practice inherent in poker, and the gap can only be bridged momentarily by the individual player's acts in concrete situations.

The situation brought about by the absence of "final answers" in poker is similar to what Derrida terms "undecidability." Undecidability occurs when no course of action follows unambiguously from the normative and rational premises of a situation. Thus, decisions taken in full recognition of a state of undecidability are in a sense real acts bringing to the fore the real of the individual subject. Derrida quotes Kierkegaard saying: "The instance of decision is a madness."[32] Undecidability forces upon the subject "mad" decisions with no support in unambiguous rationality or normativity. In the game of poker, such situations are brought about as key elements of the game. The game implies, thus, an element of "madness" and func-

tions as a test and display of character. This is expressed in the following words from author and poker player Anthony Holden:

> Whether he likes it or not, a man's character is stripped bare at the poker table; if the other poker players read him better than he does, he has only himself to blame. Unless he is both able and prepared to see himself as others do, flaws and all, he will be a loser in poker, as in life.[33]

FOUR   ♠
        ♣
        ♥
        ♦   Where Does the Money Come From?

When watching poker, as it is played today, and especially when confronted with guys in their early twenties with no formal education making $50,000–$100,000 a month by playing online poker, the ordinary sense of money of an outside observer is severely challenged. How is this possible? And the wonder of the outside observer soon boils down to the question: Where does the money come from? In this chapter, we shall be investigating this question and taking a look at the ways money is flowing around in the global network of games constituting the poker economy.

The current chapter constitutes a methodological turn of the book from theoretical deduction toward more empirically informed inductions. In poker parlance we shall be "changing gears."[1] The analyses in the current and the next chapter are based on a set of quantitative data on online poker play. A description of these data shall be presented later in this chapter.

Furthermore, my analyses are based on 30 interviews with poker players and other informants with relation to the game. The sample of interviews includes 22 interviews with poker players: 11 of these players are professionals, playing poker for a living. Six players identify themselves as compulsive gamblers. Five players are leisure players. In addition, the sample includes eight interviews with other informants: two problem-gambling counselors, one poker journalist, one poker coach, the manager of a poker club, the manager of an office community for online professionals, the representative of a major online game provider, and two computer scientists working with the construction of poker robots. Finally, two group

sessions with four and seven problem-gambling counselors have been conducted. Initially, informants were recruited in a poker club and an office community for online players. As I gradually gained insight into the field, I contacted other informants directly on the assumption that they would make interesting contributions to the project. Five out of six compulsive gamblers were recruited through a therapy center.[2] While there are in the current chapter only cursory references to the qualitative material, which has served primarily as background for the quantitative analysis, we shall be going more thoroughly into this material in the chapters of part 3.

THE PYRAMID OF THE POKER ECONOMY

Besides boosting the popularity and spread of poker, the emergence of online poker has also served to integrate poker played in various parts of the world into one global network economy of poker. Obviously, the Internet has made it possible for players sitting in, say, Sweden, Greece, Russia, the United States, and Brazil to come together and play at the same online table and have money flowing back and forth between the continents as the game progresses. But the Internet also functions to connect different individual games so that money won in one game may be carried over into another game, where it is perhaps lost. These connections go far beyond the boundaries of individual online providers as players shuffle between the vast number of sites on the Web. Even live games played in casinos, in poker clubs, and to some degree also in private settings are integrated in this global poker economy as seats in live tournaments are won in online satellite qualifiers, wins at the local poker club are used to build an online bankroll, losses in tough online games are compensated through wins in a soft weekly home game, and so on. In the age of Internet poker, different games function as communicating vessels through which money flows back and forth. Contemporary poker is globalization at its purest: a worldwide network of games and players brought together through the structuring principles of capitalism.

The structure of the poker economy is often described by using the image of a pyramid. This is very obvious in the interviews with poker players conducted for the research of this book. In the interviews, the metaphor of the pyramid is a recurring theme. One informant, the manager of an office community for online poker professionals, outlines the functioning of the poker economy:

Figuratively speaking, poker is a pyramid with losers at the bottom. The cash flow goes from the bottom and up. Say a professional has a good day and he goes home with $1,000. He has probably been playing at his own level, but the money is likely to have been won from players who normally play at lower levels but are trying their luck at this higher level. The money has then in turn been won by these players at the lower levels from even weaker players. Of course, the money may change hands many times. You can't trace the exact flow. But the ones at the top, they are sucking from below, from all the soldiers of fortune.

Other commentators on poker, typically those critical of the role of the game in society, go even further along these metaphorical lines, comparing poker to a pyramid scheme. It is informative to investigate the difference between the description of poker as merely a pyramid and the description of poker as a pyramid scheme.

First, poker is at best a zero-sum game, and in most cases a negative-sum game where a game provider in the form of a casino or online poker website continuously extracts a fraction of the money wagered (this is known as the rake). This means that money taken out of the poker economy by winners ultimately stems from people who have lost it in the game. This should come as a surprise to very few readers. So far, the structure of poker equals that of a pyramid scheme.

Second, there is a general tendency for the money in the game to flow toward a concentration at the top of the pyramid structure. A moderately skilled player may win a modest amount of money at a low-stakes game only to use this amount as buy-in at a higher level of stakes where it is lost to players with superior skills. The winners on this level may in turn transform their winnings into buy-ins at an even higher level of stakes where they are lost to even stronger players, and so on. Obviously, there are going to be some players at lower levels who are content to keep playing and winning at a level where they are skilled enough to make a profit on a regular basis. These players will be drawing money out of the poker pyramid as they win instead of moving the money upward. Conversely, there are also going to be some players at higher levels who are constant losers, thus feeding money into the pyramid at the top and not transporting it from the bottom. Later in this chapter we shall be looking into the relations between these different positions and movements within the pyramid of poker economy. This upward flow of money also marks a point of similarity between poker and a pyramid scheme.

The element of skill, however, marks the point where the similarity between poker and a pyramid scheme ends. In a typical pyramid scheme, payouts on initial investments are distributed to members on the basis of their ability to recruit new members to the scheme or through a sheer principle of seniority. In poker, however, money is distributed on the basis of individual players' level of skill. Length of service in the system, if it is not translated into experience and skill, is no guarantee of a return on your investment, and recruitment of new members to the game is rewarded only if the recruiter is able to beat the new player.

Generally, there is in poker a correlation between the average skill level of the players and the level of the stakes: the higher the level of the stakes, the higher the level of skill. Obviously, we can imagine a group of rich businessmen coming together in a private home game wagering thousands of dollars in a game of poker with none of them having skills beyond a beginner's level. But as individual games become integrated into the global network of the poker economy, so do they become subordinated to market mechanisms, balancing the level of skill and the level of the stakes. If a game is accessible to the general pool of poker players, a discrepancy, where the level of the stakes exceeds the level of skill, is soon going to attract stronger players on the lookout for a "soft" game to capitalize on their superior skills. As stronger players join the game, the weaker players are going to be gradually "cleaned out" and eliminated from the game, thus raising the general level of skill in the game until it corresponds to that of alternative games at the same level of stakes.

An anecdote from the time before the Internet, when life as a professional poker player included numerous hours on the road to find a game to play in, illustrates nicely the functioning of these market mechanisms of the poker economy. Nolan Dalla, who used to travel the roads of Texas making a living as a poker player, tells the story:

> I was playing in a $10–$20 stud eight-or-better game. It was played almost every day and we all knew each other. Every now and then a player everybody called Cowboy used to come in. He wore a big Stetson and always had a pocketful of money. When Cowboy was in the game it was like fish-fry. I mean, the guy just loved to play–and he played every hand. For anyone who knew what he was doing it was a bonanza. One day Cowboy finally got sick of losing. He announced he was fed up with eight-or-better and was going to another game across town where they were playing $10–$20 hold'em. The other game was due to start in half

an hour and Cowboy reckoned he just had time to get there. Well, wouldn't you know it—as soon as Cowboy left, the game immediately broke up. I mean, it was more like an evacuation. You could have shouted "fire" and the room would not have cleared any faster. Players jumped in their cars and made a mad dash across town to get seats locked up before Cowboy arrived. Three of us made it in 20 minutes. A couple of other players walked in a few minutes later. Finally, Cowboy arrived and looked at a table comprising exactly the same players he had just left. Without blinking, he said: "I guess ya'll got tired of playing stud eight-or-better too."[3]

Today, the Internet provides a very efficient medium of information and mobility in the network of the poker economy, bringing into effect these market mechanisms much quicker than even the 20 minutes it took for Dalla and his fellow players to travel across town. Instead of chasing around dodgy card rooms to find a game with weak players, online poker players today may utilize software such as PokerTracker to gather statistics on their opponents and Smart Buddy to find out where known weak players are playing at the moment. In that sense, the Internet has contributed to perfecting the poker economy—in market terms, that is!

Sitting down in a poker game, profit-oriented players not only consider whether they have a fair chance of winning in the game but also the time they are going to spend winning a certain amount. This may be expressed as their expected hourly rate of profit.[4] For even a modestly skilled poker player today it is not difficult to find an online game where he is almost certain to profit. The problem is, however, that the game will be played with very low stakes and the player can expect to accumulate only a few dollars over the course of a couple of hours' play. Hence, there is a general tendency for players to seek out games with higher stakes as their level of skill increases with experience, since these games carry the possibility of a higher hourly rate of profit. Since the level of the stakes is correlated with the level of skill in a game, a winning player at a lower level moving to a higher level of stakes will also have to face stronger competition. Thus he may be faced with the fact that he no longer has the same edge at the higher level as he did at the lower level, and he may go from being a winning player at the lower level to becoming a losing player at the higher level. This constitutes a second tendency: for players to stop their movement toward higher-stakes games when they reach a level where the competition is too strong for them to make a profit. The interaction between

these two tendencies is what creates the general correlation between level of skill and level of stakes in the poker economy.

FISH, SHARKS, DONKEYS, AND WHALES

Since poker is at best a zero-sum game, it is obvious that, in a two-handed game, whenever one player wins $10 the other player has to have lost $10. But once the game moves into more advanced forms, the distribution of winnings and losses becomes much less obvious. Even in a three-handed game there are numerous ways of covering one player's $10 win. The loss may be divided equally among the two losing players with $5 from each, it may consist of a $1 loss by one player and a $9 loss by the other, and so forth. As individual poker sessions around the world become integrated in a gigantic global network, the possibilities of different patterns of distribution of wins and losses multiply almost infinitely.

In the research interviews for this book, the question about the distribution of winners and losers was probed by simply asking the informants about their impression of the general poker economy. With the exception of those who are problem-gambling counselors, there was a general consensus among the informants that the money fed into the system primarily came from a large number of small losers and the money being drawn out of the system primarily went to a much smaller number of big winners. In short, a few winners win big and many losers lose small.

In the rich language of the poker culture, we find an illustrative set of terms describing this distribution. Small losers are generally referred to as "fish" (someone with an inclination toward Marxist theory might note that losers are also sometimes referred to as "producers").[5] The fish in a poker game serve as prey for the more skilled players, who are referred to as "sharks." The image of fish and sharks serves to describe first of all that the former is an easy and defenseless target of the latter. The fish is an unskilled player, whereas the shark is obviously an experienced and skilled player able to outplay the fish and win his money. Second, the image of fish and shark is also a description of a difference in size. In the animal world it takes a lot of small fish to feed a big shark and keep the shark going. In the world of poker, it takes a lot of modestly losing leisure players to support one professional player and allow him to make a living from the game.

Besides fish and sharks, the informants also introduced other animals in the world of poker. Since very weak and unskilled players, that is, the pure fish, are often reluctant to stake considerable amounts of money at the

poker table, it would be time consuming for a professional poker player, that is, the shark, to win enough money to make a living by playing directly against the small fish. This is where the "donkey" comes into the picture, serving a crucial function.

The donkey is a moderately skilled player who alternates playing on different levels of stake and skill. Against weak players at the lower levels, he is a winning player, but at the higher levels he encounters players above his own level of skill, thus losing the money earned on the lower levels. Obviously, the system of animal metaphors here is not entirely consistent. Donkeys do not eat fish, and neither do sharks eat donkeys. Nevertheless, the metaphor of the donkey has a very specific meaning. It refers to the fact that these moderately skilled players are transporting money from the lower to the higher levels of the pyramid, just like donkeys carrying goods from one place to another. Furthermore, these players have the perseverance of a donkey, which keeps them committed to this Sisyphean job of taking their wins to a higher level, where they lose them. This transportation of money is the condition of possibility for the concentration of money at the higher levels of the pyramid, where sharks are able to make a living without having to go through the tedious work of grinding out small profits in low-stakes games.

Ideally, donkeys are neither winners nor losers but breakevens, their loss at the higher level being evened out by lower-stakes winnings. What drives the donkeys, according to informants, is the prospect of advancement in the hierarchy, the prospect of becoming a shark. Over the course of shuffling between different levels of the game, the donkey might improve his skills enough to develop from easy prey to winning player, a so-called regular, even at the higher levels.

A fourth figure in the poker economy is referred to as a "whale." This metaphor is again consistent with the imagery of fish and sharks. A whale is basically a big fish. Like the fish, the whale is feeding money into the poker economy from the outside economy. Contrary to the fish, the whale does not do this in minor increments in low-stakes games but rather puts major sums of money into high-stakes games. Thus, a whale is characterized by three qualities: access to considerable amounts of money from the outside economy, willingness to risk this money in high-stakes poker, and a level of skill below the other players in the game.

Unlike the fish and the donkey, who live anonymous lives in the poker economy, some whales rise to fame (but not fortune) through their sheer willingness to lose vast amounts of money.

Famous whales include banker and real estate magnate Andy Beal, who over a five-year period from 2001 to 2006 took on a group of top poker players known as "the corporation" in a series of high-stakes matches of Heads-Up Limit Texas Hold 'Em with blinds going as high as $100,000 to $200,000.[6] Although ending the series of matches with a deficit to be counted in millions of dollars, Beal was no easy target, and there were points in the course of the game where he was able to drive the players of the corporation to their knees. Beal's primary asset was his utter disregard for money, enabling him to play at such astronomical levels of stake that the professionals were pushed beyond their comfort zone; that is, playing for huge amounts of real money disturbed their ability to play optimally in the game.

Another notable whale is Guy Laliberté, owner of Cirque du Soleil, estimated to have spent in 2008 alone between $10 million and $20 million out of his billion-dollar fortune playing high-stakes online poker on FullTilt.com.[7] One estimate says Laliberté is the direct source of approximately 50 percent of the money won by the top 10 winners at the site in 2008.[8]

METHOD AND DATA

Firsthand accounts from poker players may indeed be relied upon to outline the general functioning of the poker economy. However, in order to get a more precise picture of the way money is distributed in the poker economy, we shall be confronting the matter in a more direct and systematic fashion. Through quantitative analysis, we shall see how money in the poker economy is distributed between overall losers and winners in the field.[9]

In order to explore this question, a large sample of actually played poker hands was collected. This collection of data is made possible by technical innovations within the field of poker itself. In recent years, software tools have been developed to aid poker players in refining their game. In itself, this is a symptom of a professionalization of the game that we are going to speak more about in chapter 6. Programs such as Hold 'Em Manager and PokerTracker enable players to monitor their own and opponents' game and provide a statistical profile of players based on hand histories fed into the program. These profiles aid players as they try to "read" opponents' games based on their particular style of playing. In other words, the programs provide different statistics that allow players to clas-

sify opponents as tight or loose, passive or aggressive, or place them in a number of other more sophisticated categories.

Often, players just rely on data being fed into the program as it records the games in which the player herself is involved. In this way, a database on the opponents with whom the players have crossed swords over the course of time is gradually built up. However, poker players' constant striving for an edge against opponents has generated yet another branch on the tree of poker-related business. A number of companies such as HHDealer.com and HandHQ.com have specialized in data mining major poker websites, recording hand histories of all the hands played on the sites, and then selling targeted samples of these data to poker players seeking to boost the statistical significance of their Hold'Em Manager or PokerTracker databases.

The sample I acquired for the analysis of the poker economy consists of hand histories of all the hands played on the website of a major online poker provider throughout January 2009. For a number of technical as well as methodological reasons, the sample contains only hands played in No Limit Texas Hold 'Em on the nine stakes levels ranging from NL $25 (No Limit game with a maximum buy-in of $25 and big blinds of 25 cents) to NL $5,000 (No Limit game with a maximum buy-in of $5,000 and big blinds of $50) and on three different table sizes: full-ring (maximum of nine players), shorthand (maximum of six players), and heads-up (two players).[10] We shall be referring to NL $25 and NL $50 as micro stakes, NL $100 and NL $200 as low stakes, NL $400 and NL $600 as medium stakes, and NL $1,000, NL $2,000, and NL $5,000 as high stakes. The sample amounts to approximately 18.5 million hand histories.

Using PokerTracker, this body of data is converted into profiles of the individual players who have been playing in the particular games in the particular period. The profiles contain statistics on their wins and losses and the number of hands they have played, and measures of the way they have played their hands. We shall be returning to these measures later. The 18.5 million hand histories were converted into a total of 150,688 individual player profiles.

Before moving on to the results of the analysis, there are a couple of methodological issues and limitations in the material to be considered. A key issue in any kind of quantitative research is representativeness. This concerns the extent to which it may justifiably be assumed that the results of the sample analysis constitute a representative picture of the overall poker economy. Given the particular nature of poker, the issue of representativeness branches off into two questions.

First, there is the relation between the sample of 150,688 poker players and the total population of poker players. In regards to this question, it is assumed that players at the given site do not differ systematically from players at other sites and that it is thus justified to treat the sample as a random selection of poker players on all websites. However, it should be noted that because of technical and practical limitations the sample comprises only online cash-game play. For technical reasons very small stakes games below NL $25 are not represented in the sample. I believe, however, that the impact of these games on the general poker economy is so small that they can be disregarded. Likewise, high-stakes games above NL $5,000 are not included in the sample either. It is not possible to say how the inclusion of these games would influence the overall results of the analyses. It is believed that there are significant differences between cash-game play and tournament play. As the sample does not comprise tournament play, it is an unresolved question to what extent the results may be generalized to constitute a picture of both forms of poker. Obviously, the sample does not include live play either.

Second, the hand histories from which the profiles of the individual players are derived also constitute samples of individual player play. This raises another question of representativeness between the sample of hands in which an individual player has been involved and the total amount of hands this player has played throughout his poker career. In regards to this question, it is indeed assumed that the sample of one month's play is a representative expression of general patterns in the individual player's game. However, given the "natural variance" in poker, that is, the fluctuations in players' achievements due to the element of randomness in the game, this assumption should be kept in mind when interpreting the results. In interviews, professional poker players report that their monthly winnings fluctuate heavily with "downswing" of several months of negative results not being uncommon. Hence, we cannot be sure whether some of the losing players identified in the data material are in fact winning players over a longer period of time and whether some of the winning players in the material are in fact overall losing players experiencing, temporarily, a lucky "run of cards." On the other hand, given the magnitude of the sample of players, it is reasonable to assume that some of these deviations due to natural variance in the individual player's game will be counteracted by the fact that the aggregate analysis is based on 150,688 players, thus strengthening the representativeness of the results.

WINNERS AND LOSERS

The first issue of the investigation regards the distribution of winners versus losers and more specifically the distribution of big and small winners versus big and small losers. This investigation corresponds to the account of the poker economy conveyed by poker players and other informants in the qualitative interviews. In this account, small losers, fish, provide the main part of the money fed into the poker pyramid and big losers, whales, provide only a small part. This money would then accumulate at the top end of the pyramid where a group of professional top players, sharks, would pull it out of the economy. We shall posit this account as our working hypothesis to be tested in the analysis.

In figure 3 we find a distribution of winners and losers specified by the size of the amount they have won or lost.

With regards to our hypothesis, this figure does not give an unambiguous answer. We see that there is indeed a heavy overweight of small-scale winners and losers, with 48.7 percent of all players being small losers in the range up to $100 and 26.1 percent of all players being winners within the same range. As we move upward in the figure, we see that the percentage of moderate losers and winners decreases to 15.5 percent and 6.5 percent respectively in the range between $100 and $1,000. In the category of big losers and winners with negative or positive results in the range between $1,000 and $10,000, we find only 1.9 percent and 1.2 percent of all players. And in the very top category of very big losers and winners having lost or won more than $10,000 within one month's play we find only 0.05 percent and 0.08 percent of all players.

However, the account of the profits of poker sharks as being funded primarily by small fish seems to be only partially confirmed in this analysis. At each level in the figure, the number of winners is outweighed by the number of losers, with the top level as the only exception, where there are approximately 50 percent more winners than losers. If the account of the poker economy as presented by the informants were completely accurate, we could have expected to see a more marked overweight of winners in the top category and also some overweight of winners in the category of big losers and winners. It seems that the informants are right that there are many more fish than sharks, but they seem to have underestimated the number of whales in the game.

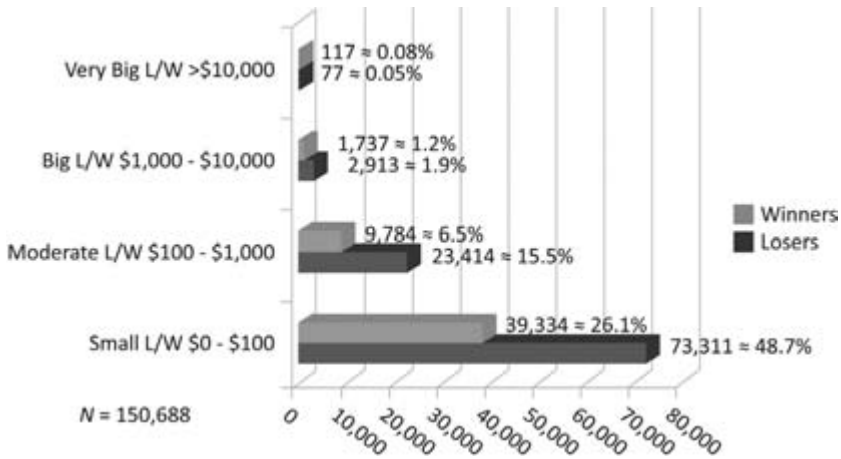In order to probe further into the question, the distribution of winners

Fig. 3. Distribution of winners and losers

and losers is explored from a slightly different angle in figure 4. Here the distribution of different categories of winners and losers is counted not in the number of players in each category but in the amount of money each category of players takes out of or contributes to the poker economy.

If we look at the left chart of losing players, that is, money being fed into the poker economy, we see that the pivot point, compared to the distribution based on the number of individual players in figure 3, has shifted from the small to the moderate and big losers in the range. These categories of players contribute 41 percent and 39 percent respectively of the total amount of money lost in the game. Small losers contribute only 12 percent and very big losers only 8 percent. Again, the analysis does not seem to confirm the working hypothesis. It is of course a matter of debate where to draw the line between a fish losing an insignificant amount of money and a whale losing a substantial amount of money, but the picture drawn by figure 4 suggests that there are a great number of players contributing to the overall poker economy by losing, individually, moderate or large amounts of money.

Turning to the chart of winning players, we see that the money won in the poker economy does indeed concentrate in the hands of a limited amount of big and very big winners. The small number of very big winners that we identified in figure 3 win 13 percent of all the money lost, and the big winners take home 27 percent of total losses. The much bigger group
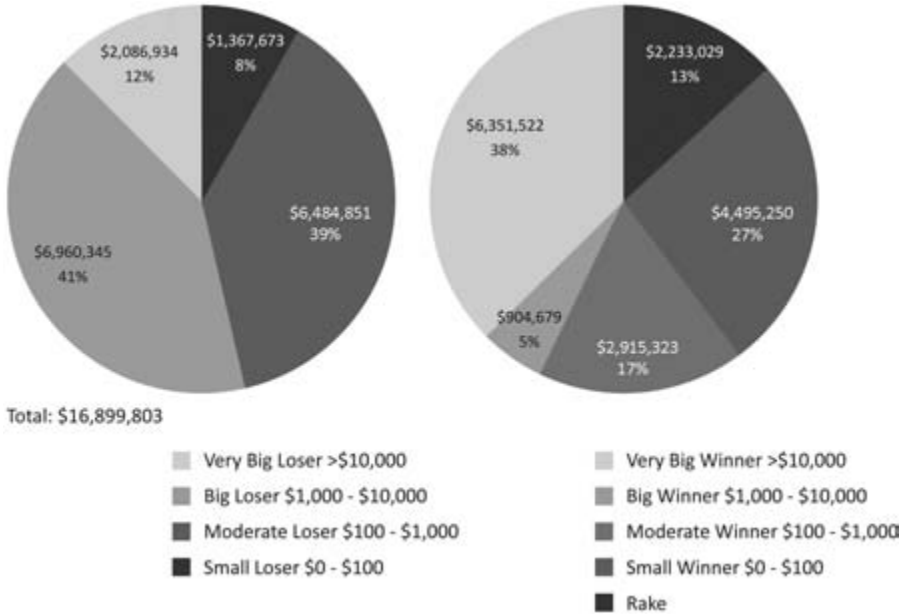
Fig. 4. Money won or lost by different categories of losers or winners

of moderate winners wins only 17 percent of all the money lost and the small winners only 5 percent. Hence, the part of our working hypothesis stating that it is mainly sharks that profit in the poker economy seems to be confirmed in this analysis.

In the right-hand chart of figure 4, a new actor, hidden in the previous analysis, enters the stage. As we can see, the lion's share of the winnings is disgorged from the system not to any category of poker players but to the game provider. Game providers make money by taking a small percentage of every pot, typically 5 percent with a maximum of $3 per pot. This is known as "the rake." As money flows back and forth between players over the course of a poker game, this minuscule "gaming tax" adds up to a considerable portion of the amount of money won and lost. A staggering $6,351,522 or 38 percent of the total amount of money lost in the sampled games is raked by the game provider. This illustrates very clearly that in order to make a profit from poker, you have to be able not only to beat your opponents but also to "beat the rake."

At this point it is important to note that there is also a flow of money

from the game provider back to the players that is not registered in the analysis. It is customary for game providers to offer different kinds of sign-up bonuses to new players, and many regular players have so-called rake-back deals or other kinds of bonus programs. In principle, sign-up bonuses and rake-back deals work similarly by returning a certain percentage of the rake back to the players. A sign-up bonus is typically a onetime payout when the player has played a certain amount of hands or has paid a certain amount of money in rake fees during his play. A rake-back is paid out on a regular basis, say once a month, and also calculated from the number of hands played or rake fees paid by the player. Whether paid out in the form of sign-up bonus or rake-back, these deals principally return an average of approximately 30 percent of the rake to the players.

In the case of frequent medium- and high-stakes players playing several thousand hands each month, rake-backs often constitute a substantial amount of money. To some players the rake-back is what makes the difference between an overall positive or negative result. One informant reported that in one particular month he had a deficit of $3,000 on his poker game. As his play amounted to an impressive 185,000 hands, he was, however, able to cash in almost $27,000 in different kinds of rake-back deals, turning his moderate deficit into a considerable net profit for the month. Another informant, himself a professional player, used the term "rake-back professionals" in a somewhat derogatory way to refer to players who are not able to make a living on their regular income from the game but have to rely on their monthly payment of rake-backs to get by.

Sign-up bonuses and rake-backs should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the previous two analyses. In figure 3, we can expect that some of the players registered as moderate, big, or even very big losers may indeed belong to a lesser category of losers or even turn out to be overall winning players when their rake-backs are included in the balance sheet. And we can expect that some of the money lost by small or moderate losers does in fact stem from sign-up bonuses offered by the game provider. Furthermore, we can expect that some of players currently registered as winners in one category may in fact advance to a higher category of winners when their rake-back or sign-up bonus is counted in.

Similarly, in figure 4, we could expect that the inclusion of rake-backs and sign-up bonuses would redistribute a portion of the game provider's 38 percent share of total losses to both winners and losers. Assuming this portion is redistributed equally among all categories of winners and losers, the losers' chart would be affected only in terms of the absolute sums but not

in terms of the relative distribution of losses. The winners' chart, however, would be affected in both absolute and relative terms, and we could expect that each category of winners' share of the total amount lost would increase.

Our working hypothesis predicted that we would see a relatively large number of small losers compared to small winners and a relatively large number of big winners compared to big losers. If we take the analysis so far at face value, this hypothesis seems to be only partially confirmed, since we do in fact find a substantial number of big losers in the material. However, if we were to include the effects of rake-back deals and sign-up bonuses, we should expect this to move the actual results toward the results predicted by the hypothesis. Within the framework of the current material and analyses, it is, however, not possible to say whether this effect would be enough for us to confirm the hypothesis.

In the previous analyses, players have been categorized by the net result of their poker playing during the one month in which they have been observed. These analyses have given us an indication of the relative distribution of different categories of winners and losers, that is, sharks, fish, whales, and even the rake. Compared to the informants' account of the poker economy, there is, however, still an important figure missing in the description: the donkeys. As we recall, these are the players who "transport" money from the lower levels to the higher levels of the game.

In figure 5 the distribution of wins and losses by different categories of winners and losers that we have already seen in figure 4 has been split by the four levels of stake: micro, low, medium, and high stakes.

The result of the split in itself is hardly surprising. We see that the amount of money lost and won by small and moderate losers and winners respectively decreases as we move to higher levels of stake, whereas the amount of money lost and won by big and very big losers and winners increases correspondingly.

Furthermore, we see that the number of individual players decreases gradually from 115,739 in micro stakes to 5.912 in high stakes. Individual players may figure more than once in this count if they have been observed in multiple levels of stake. The count corresponds to a percentage distribution of micro, 62 percent; low, 24 percent; medium, 11 percent; and high, 3 percent.

Even though the number of individuals on each level decreases, the total amount lost and won (including the rake) is approximately constant over the upper three levels of stake. Behind the graphic illustration of the
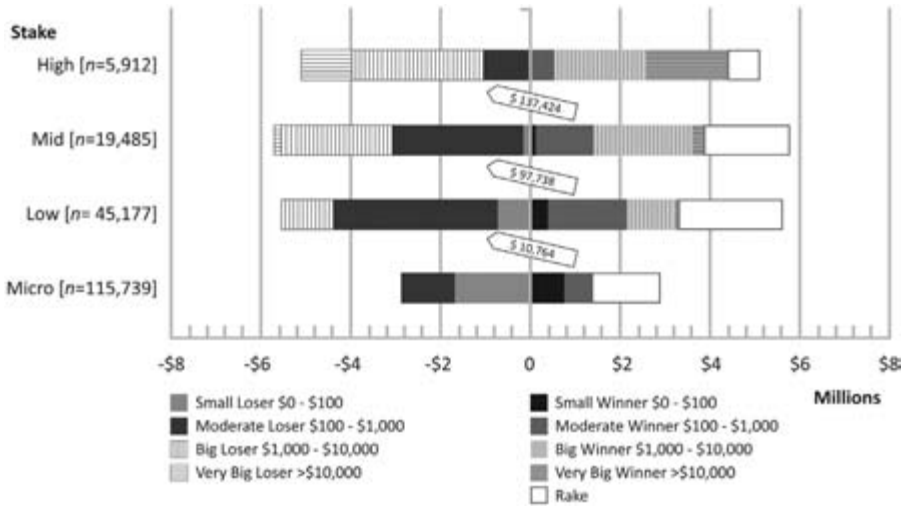
Fig. 5. Money won or lost on different levels of stake

figure lies a distribution of $2,881,916 lost in micro-stakes games, $5,504,620 lost in low-stakes games, $5,674,854 lost in medium-stakes games, and a total of $5,081,015 lost in high-stakes games. Because of the rake maximum of $3 per pot, the share of the total losses appropriated by the game provider decreases as the level of stake increases. In micro-stakes games, the rake constitutes 52 percent of the amount lost, in low stakes 42 percent, in medium stakes 32 percent, and in high stakes only 14 percent.

The main point of the figure lies, however, not in the distribution of money lost, won, and raked within the different levels of stake but in the money flowing between the different levels. This money is illustrated by the diagonal arrows in the figure. The amount in the arrows is calculated by separating players observed on multiple levels that win on one level and lose on another level. If a player wins on a lower level and loses on a higher level, the loss covered by the lower level win is registered as an upward flow of money. If a player wins on a higher level and loses on a lower level, the loss covered by the higher level win is registered as a downward flow of money. The downward flow is then subtracted from the upward flow, resulting in the net flow as indicated by the amount in each of the three figures. Thus $10,764 of the money won in micro-stakes games is lost again in low-stakes games, $97,738 of the money won in low-stakes games

is lost again in medium-stakes games, and $137,424 of the money won in medium-stakes games is lost again in high-stakes games.

If we compare these figures to the overall amounts lost and won at each level of stake, indeed they do not constitute a significant proportion. For instance, the money lost in high-stakes games stemming from wins in medium-stakes games constitutes only 3 percent of the total amount lost in high-stakes games. At this point the limitations of the sample should be noted. Since the sample covers only one month of play, we are able to register only the flow of money taking place within this period, that is, the player has to both win the money at one level and lose it at the next level within the span of one month for us to be able to register the flow.

Based on the accounts of informants, there is justified reason to believe that the flows of money between different levels of stake have cycles exceeding one month. A typical pattern is for a player aspiring to advance in the poker hierarchy to build up a bankroll over the course of several months' play at a level he masters. Then once his bankroll is big enough, he will test his skills by taking a "shot" at a higher level. At this higher level, he will encounter stronger opponents and typically lose part of or perhaps even his entire bankroll. He will then move back to his "regular" level to rebuild his bankroll. If we observe such a "shot" in the sample, we are only be able to register part of the money flow. Say the player loses $1,000 in a shot. We would only register that part of the loss that is covered by winnings in the present month even though this constitutes only a portion of the total amount being transported from one level to another. Taking these methodological limitations into account, the arrows in the figure should thus be interpreted as illustrations of general trends in the flow of money rather than accurate measures of the amount of money in these flows.

What these arrows illustrate is of course the money being transported to the top of the poker economy by the so-called donkeys. Unfortunately, the analysis does not allow us to say anything more precise about the rate of donkeys in the overall poker economy relative to sharks, fish, and whales.

In conclusion to the analyses in figures 3 and 5, we have indeed identified some of the trends suggested by the informants, poker players, and other actors in the field. It is true that there is a huge overweight of small and moderate losers, fish, compared to big and very big losers, whales. It is also true that the big and very big winners, the sharks, take in the major part of the total amount of money won. And finally, we are able to show that some players, donkeys, win money in games at lower stakes

only to lose this money in higher-stakes games, thus creating a net flow of money upward in the poker pyramid.

At the same time the analyses have provided results that do not immediately correspond to the general image of the poker economy presented by poker players in the qualitative interviews. There seem to be a substantial number of big and very big losers, whales, at least comparable to the number of big and very big winners. And these big and very big losers make a contribution to the overall poker economy comparable to the amount taken out by big and very big winners. Thus, the overall conclusion to the analysis is only a partial confirmation of the working hypothesis.

One important methodological question left unanswered by the analysis regards the extent to which the inclusion of rake-back deals and sign-up bonuses would significantly alter the results. Another methodological question, similarly left unanswered, regards the extent to which a sample covering a longer period of time would trace the flow of money between different levels of stake more accurately. Both adjustments could potentially push the results of the analysis toward a more unambiguous confirmation of the hypothesis.

♠
♣
♥
♦   Styles of Play in the Poker Economy

Behind the distribution of wins and losses that we have analyzed in the previous chapter lie a vast number of different ways of playing poker. Poker players differ not only in the size of their wins and losses but also in their frequency of play, the amounts they care to wager, and their very style of playing. In this chapter, we shall be going behind the distribution of wins and losses to see how different types of poker players may be stamped out based on such differences and how these types may be observed in the empirical material.

TAG, LAG, TP, AND LP

The idea of grouping poker players into different types of players is by no means foreign to the poker field itself. As we have already discussed, a key to good poker playing is the ability to read opponents with regards to their particular style of playing. In this kind of reading it is common to classify players along the two dimensions: tight/loose and passive/aggressive.[1]

The first dimension refers to a player's hand requirements for engaging in a hand instead of folding immediately. A very tight player will bet and call only with premium hands such as high pairs, ace-king, ace-queen, and a few other combinations. All other hands are folded as soon as the player is required to put money into the pot. The more hand combinations are included in the repertoire of a player, for instance small and medium pairs and suited connectors of the type 9♦ 8♦ or 6♠ 5♠, the looser he is catego-

rized. Generally speaking, the looser a player's style of play the more risk he is willing to accept in the game, since he will engage in pots without being confident that he has the best hand from the beginning.

The second dimension, passive/aggressive, refers to the way a player tends to play his hands once he is engaged in a pot. Passive players tend to sit back and let other players take the initiative in the game. This is reflected in the fact that their most frequent move is the call. They let their opponents bet and raise only to hook onto them by calling the hand through to showdown. At the other end of the spectrum, aggressive players tend to take the initiative whenever they are engaged in a hand. Instead of just calling, they tend to bet and raise, and as soon as they realize they are beat, aggressive players do not hesitate to fold.

In figure 6 we see a graphic illustration of way the two dimensions of poker playing combine into different styles of play. This classification should be understood as ideal types since actual poker playing allows numerous variations within the spectrum. In the lower left quadrant, we find the tight-passive player (TP). This is a player who plays cautiously and gets involved in only a very few hands when he is convinced he is holding the best hand. At the same time he will be playing these hands passively, calling opponents' bets. This kind of player is also known as a "rock," indicating that he is not easily moved by other players. The TP is typically a player with some skill in the game, but his main asset is probably the patience required to sit and wait until he is dealt a strong hand. His game is, however, very predictable, and this is his great weakness. At best, the TP will manage to make a modest profit against weaker opponents who play too loose.

In the lower right quadrant, we find the loose-passive player (LP). This is the ideal opponent for players looking for profit. The LP plays a wide range of hands both strong and weak but he plays these hands in a straightforward passive way by calling them down, that is by responding to the actions of other players by checking and calling rather than raising or folding, in the hope that they will turn out to be the strongest at showdown. This adds a lot of action to the game and at the same time leaves control of the game to opponents who are more or less free to decide when they want to play in a big pot and when they want to keep the pot small. The LP is indeed less predictable than the TP since his range of possible hands is much wider. However, if other players make sure to bet into the LP only when they themselves are holding strong hands, his unpredictable style will most often do little damage to anyone other than himself. LPs are typ-
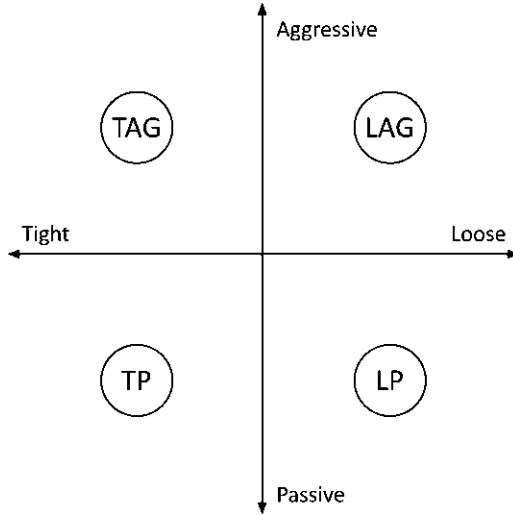
Fig. 6. Typology of poker players

ically unskilled players with a craving for action preventing them from waiting for the right hands to play.

In the upper left quadrant, we find the tight-aggressive player (TAG). This is the type of playing advocated by most poker theorists, and we can refer to this style as ABC poker.[2] The TAG will get involved in a pot only when he believes he has the strongest hand or a hand with reasonable probability of improving into the best hand. Furthermore, he tends to play his hands aggressively by betting, raising, or folding rather than calling. This is indeed an offensive style of playing, but at the same time aggressiveness has certain defensive qualities insofar as it serves to drive opponents out of a pot before they get the chance to complete a hand that could have won the pot. While adapting to a TAG style is in itself no guarantee of winning in poker, it is certainly within this category that we find the vast majority of those players who do manage to make a steady profit from their game.

Finally, in the upper-right quadrant we find the loose-aggressive player (LAG). The LAG will play a wider range of hands than the TAG, but he will be playing these hands in a very active and aggressive way. This is a more risky style than the TAG since the LAG becomes involved in a lot of pots where he is not certain to have the best hand. In order to keep his

game profitable, the LAG must be able to read his opponents very accurately not only in terms of the cards they may be holding but also in terms of the way they can be expected to respond to different situations. If the LAG is able to master this dimension of the game, the style may prove profitable; if not, application of the LAG style may be very expensive.

While there is a general consensus that passive play is a losing strategy, the question of whether TAG is a profitable style and whether TAG or LAG is the true winning style is indeed contested within the poker community. According to accounts from informants who have some years of experience in poker, there has been a significant change in the game over the last couple of years. In the years immediately after 2000, when online poker was just beginning to become popular, there were a great number of unskilled and inexperienced players in the game. This meant that with just a moderate knowledge of basic poker strategy, it was possible to win a considerable amount of money very quickly. As the average opponent was a loose and not very skilled player, the appropriate strategy at the time was straightforward tight-aggressive ABC poker.

According to the informants, even though there has been a steady influx of new players into the game, the general level of skill has risen in recent years. This means that even at the lower levels, players have an understanding of the fundamentals of poker and know what they are doing. As a consequence, straightforward ABC poker is no longer as profitable as it used to be. In order to make money, players have to be innovative and creative and develop new moves and strategies. Once you get beyond the lower levels of the game, it is no longer enough to just play by the book and then wait for other players to make basic mistakes. Instead, players have to be able to make the game difficult for their opponents, constantly putting them in tough spots where no easy solutions apply. Furthermore, when online poker first became popular it was mostly played full-ring (9–10 players). In recent years shorthand (5–6 players), and heads-up (2 players) have become more and more popular, and today shorthand is the most widely played table size.

Both of these trends—the rise in the general level of skill and the movement toward smaller table sizes—have encouraged a more loose and aggressive style. Obviously, if there are fewer players at a table, each player should lower his requirements for getting involved in a pot. And if the other players at the table are all playing very tightly, it may suddenly become profitable to be the one breaking this norm by loosening up.

Poker professional Gus Hansen was probably one of the first and certainly one of the most prominent players to promote the LAG style as a winning strategy. Here is how he sums up the appropriate strategy for a six-handed poker game:

> Somebody once said, "Patience is a virtue" and I'm sure he was right. All I know is he definitely wasn't talking about short-handed tournament poker. Too much patience will end up ruining you, as the fast-paced nature of the game will take its toll. In a nine-handed game patient hand-selection and watching the world go by is a very reasonable approach, but those virtues come up a tad bit short when we are down to six players. Six-handed is more of a brute force environment where aggressive behavior and constant pressure is the nature of the beast. With nine players around the table you can quietly pick your spots, but as the number of players goes down and the intensity goes up sometimes the spots pick you! So before you sit down make sure you got the right head count. It is not enough to fine-tune your arsenal if you are bringing the wrong guns.[3]

As the LAG style generates action in a game and brings about more of those extreme and fascinating situations, where the role of chance and bluffing become decisive for the outcome of a game, Hansen has earned himself the image of one of the most interesting players in the game since his name has been identified with this style of playing. Furthermore, the fame of Hansen has encouraged many players to try to repeat his success by emulating his loose and aggressive strategy, further loosening up the game.

Whether LAG or TAG is today the appropriate winning strategy is very difficult to answer unequivocally, and the question is in any case beyond the competences of this author to discuss. It seems that poker today is very diverse, and profitability lies in the ability to adapt and shift strategy relative to the concrete game situation rather than stick to one particular strategy.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON THE ANALYSIS

These two dimensions of poker playing and the typology of ideal typical poker strategies give us the basic coordinates for an empirical analysis of the field of poker players that digs a level deeper than the mere distribution of wins and losses. The purpose of the analysis is to add empirical substance to the ideal types just described and illustrated in figure 6 and to see

how the different strategic approaches to the game are correlated with other relevant measures such as win/loss, frequency of play, and level of stake.

Again, the working hypothesis is derived from the accounts given by informants in the qualitative interviews. Based on these accounts and a great deal of qualified guesswork, I constructed a working hypothesis consisting of a typology of five different categories of players:

As the most common type of player we expect to find a loose-passive player, who plays only a modest amount of hands in micro- and low-level games and thus only suffers a modest overall loss.

As the second most common type of player we expect to find a tight-passive or tight-medium player, who plays more hands than the previous type in micro- and low-level games and manages to either lose a little, break even, or make a modest profit in the game.

The third type is tight-aggressive player, who plays a large number of hands in low-, medium-, or high-stakes games and makes a moderate or large profit.

Then we expect to find a loose-aggressive player, who also plays a large number of hands in medium- and high-stakes games and makes the biggest profit of all types, yet with a great variance, meaning that in this category we should also find some big losers.

Finally, we expect to find a very loose and either very passive or very aggressive type of player, who plays a small or moderate amount of hands in medium- and high-stakes games and suffers the greatest losses of all categories of players.

For the exploration and test of this hypothesis we shall be using data material presented in the previous chapter. In order to be able to compare measures of tightness-looseness and different measures of aggression between players, the material is restricted to play in shorthand games (six players). Furthermore, since these measures are also based on averages over a number of hands, players who played less than 10 hands in the sample period are filtered out. With these restrictions the data sample contains a total of 124,304 cases. It should be noted that play is registered separately within the four different levels of stake. This means that individual players observed on multiple stake levels figure more than once in the data material as their play and results on separate levels are registered as separate cases in the data matrix.

Table 3 shows an overview of the variables in the data sample to be included in our analysis. The first three variables are pretty straightforward and require little explanation other than what is already given in the table. The coding of the variables is first based on theoretical assumptions about the distribution of players and then adjusted through a number of preliminary analyses of the data.

The last three variables are technical measures used to profile a poker player's style of playing. Software programs such as Hold'Em Manager and PokerTracker provide a long list of measures for players to profile opponents' play. VP$IP, PFR, and AF are the most commonly used measures and therefore chosen as variables in our analysis.

"VP$IP" stands for Voluntary Put Money In Pot. VP$IP expresses the percentage of all hands where the player contributes money to the pot be-

TABLE 3. Variables in Data Samples

Variable	Coding	Explanation
Stake	Micro (NL $25; NL $50) Low (NL $100; NL $200) Medium (NL $400; NL $600) High (NL $1,000; NL $2,000; NL $5,000)	Level of stake where play is observed
Hands	Low Frequency (10–50) Medium Frequency (50–500) High Frequency (>500)	Amount of hands played by the player within the sample period
WinLoss	Loss (> $10,000) Loss ($1,000–$10,000) Loss ($100–$1,000) Loss ($10–$100) Break even (-$10–$10) Win ($10–$100) Win ($100–$1,000) Win ($1,000–$10,000) Win (>$10,000)	Net result of play within the sample period
VP$IP	Tight (<25) Semi-loose (25–40) Loose (>40)	VoluntaryPutmoneyInPot. Percentage of hands where player puts money into the pot in addition to compulsory blinds.
PFR	PreFlop Passive (>20) PreFlop Medium (10–20) PreFlop Aggressive (<10)	PreFlopRaise. Percentage of pots where player raises before the flop. Here the measure expresses the difference in percentage points between PFR and VPIP.
AF	PostFlop Very Passive (<1) PostFlop Passive (1–2) PostFlop Medium (2–3) PostFlop Aggressive (>3)	AggressionFactor. The ratio of bets, raises, and folds compared to calls on all betting rounds after the flop.

Note: NL = no limit.

yond the compulsory posting of small and big blinds. VP$IP is a measure of the player's hand requirements for entering a pot, that is, a measure of how tight or loose the player is playing. A VP$IP of 10 means that a player only plays the strongest 10 percent of his hands. In a six-handed game, this is very tight. A VP$IP of 50 means that a player plays 50 percent of all his hands, which is very loose.

The VP$IP variable has been in the first instance coded in seven categories on the basis of general guidelines for the interpretation of Poker-Tracker figures.[4] Subsequently, the coding has been collapsed into three categories on the basis of preliminary analyses, indicating where the significant thresholds in the variable lie.

"PFR" stands for Pre-Flop Raise. In itself, PFR expresses the percentage of all hands where the player raises before the flop. PFR is a measure of a player's level of aggression before the flop. PFR is a subset of VP$IP insofar as VP$IP expresses the percentage of hands where the player raises or calls and PFR expresses the percentage of hands where the player raises. PFR is by definition lower than or equal to VP$IP. In our analysis we have chosen to include PFR not as an absolute value but rather in comparison to VP$IP. So the number actually expresses the difference between VP$IP and PFR. Say a player has a VP$IP of 35 and a PFR of 30; he is registered with the value 5 and thus categorized as a preflop aggressive player. The coding follows general guidelines for the interpretation of PokerTracker figures[5] and has not been recoded.

"AF" stands for Aggression Factor. AF is calculated by dividing the total number of the player's bets and raises on flop, turn, and river with his total number of calls on flop, turn, and river. The expression is a ratio and functions as a measure of a player's level of aggression after the flop. The variable has been initially coded using the general guidelines but then recoded into the above categories on the basis of preliminary analyses of the distribution of players and correlations with other variables.

The statistical method employed in the analysis of the data is called latent class analysis. This method is used to find subtypes of cases (latent classes) in a dataset with multiple categorical data. The technical formulation of the basis of the method is the following:

> The basic premise of the study of latent variables is that the covariation actually observed among the manifest (observed) variables is due to each manifest variable's relationship to the latent variable—that the latent variable "explains" the relationships between the observed vari-

ables. If such a variable exists, and can be characterized, then controlling for this latent variable will result in diminishing the covariation between all of the observed variables to the level of chance covariation. Consequently, the latent variable is said to be the "true" source of the originally observed covariations.[6]

In other words, the method seeks to reduce the variation in the observed data to the effect of a single underlying (latent) variable with mutually exclusive categories (classes) manifesting themselves in the data. The method is often used to construct typologies and thus serves our purpose perfectly.[7] As this method works with categorical data, we have recoded our initially continuous and ordinal variables into this kind of data as reported above.

LATENT CLASSES OF THE POKER ECONOMY

Conducting a latent class analysis of the data produces the result reported in table 4. This table forms a probabilistic space expressing an individual player's likelihood of belonging to a specific category under each of the variables given his membership in each of the different classes. Before we start reading the table, it should be noted that the names of the different classes did not jump automatically out of the statistical analysis. The names were assigned post hoc as part of the interpretation of the data. In the remaining part of this chapter, the meaning and content of these class names shall be unfolded.

An immediate look at the table reveals that the latent class analysis has identified five mutually exclusive classes and in this respect does in fact confirm our hypothesis about the number of different types of poker players (classes).[8] The first class, designated as "Novice" players, comprises an estimated 13 percent of the total amount of players. The second class, "Leisure" players, is the largest class, comprising 40 percent of all players. The third class, "ABC" players, is the second largest, with 28 percent. The fourth class, "Serious" players, comprises 15 percent. Finally, the fifth class, "Professional" players, comprises only 4 percent of the sample. When we look into the characteristics of the different types of players, the analysis does to some extent, yet not completely, confirm the hypothesis.

If we look at the first three variables, there is a general tendency for the high categories to become more likely as we move from the right to the left in the table. Classes 1, 2, and 3 are primarily micro- and low-stakes players, whereas classes 4 and 5 comprise also medium- and high-stakes players.

Likewise, the likelihood of playing a medium or high amount of hands increases steadily going from class 1 to class 2, class 2 to classes 3 and 4, and from classes 3 and 4 to class 5. We find a similar tendency regarding the likelihood of being a losing, a winning, and a highly winning player.

When looking at the variable WinLoss we should consider the possible implications of bonuses and rake-back deals on our results. Bonuses as well as rake-backs are paid out on the basis of stake level and the amount of hands played. As both stake level and hand frequency tend to increase as we

TABLE 4. Latent Class Analysis

	1. Novice (%)	2. Leisure (%)	3. ABC (%)	4. Serious (%)	5. Professional (%)
Stake					
Micro (<$50)	64	64	61	12	12
Low ($100; $200)	28	28	31	50	50
Medium ($400; $600)	6	6	6	28	26
High (>$1,000)	1	1	1	10	12
Hands					
Low Frequency (10–50)	94	44	11	11	0
Medium Frequency (50–500)	6	56	63	63	5
High Frequency (>500)	0	0	26	26	95
WinLoss					
Loss (>$10,000)	1	0	0	0	0
Loss ($1,000–$10,000)	1	2	2	2	2
Loss ($100–$1,000)	21	21	21	21	21
Loss ($10–$100)	39	39	39	1	0
Break even (-$10–$10)	29	25	7	0	0
Win ($10–$100)	9	14	31	4	4
Win ($100–$1,000)	0	0	0	68	43
Win ($1000–$10,000)	0	0	0	5	27
Win (>$10,000)	0	0	0	0	2
VP$IP					
Tight (<25)	28	19	19	19	19
Semiloose (25–40)	34	40	40	40	40
Loose (>40)	39	41	41	41	41
PFR					
PreFlop Passive (>20)	67	67	54	50	0
PreFlop Medium (10–20)	21	21	28	32	11
PreFlop Aggressive (<10)	12	12	18	18	89
AF					
PostFlop Very Passive (<1)	92	11	7	7	0
PostFlop Passive (1–2)	2	38	32	32	7
PostFlop Medium (2–3)	2	22	31	31	41
PostFlop Aggressive (>3)	4	29	29	29	52
Estimated % of total	13	40	28	15	4

Note: N = 123,304.

move rightward in the table, it is reasonable to assume that the differences between the classes in terms of their results would in fact turn out to be greater than estimated in the model if bonuses and rake-backs were included. We could thus expect to see, for instance, a higher likelihood of a player in class 3 being a winning player, a higher likelihood of a player in class 4 winning more than $1,000, and also higher likelihood values for the upper two categories of winners in class 5.

Proceeding to look into the last three variables, describing the profile of the players' styles of playing, we encounter the most remarkable deviation from our initial assumptions. We see that the different types of players are not markedly distinguished by their level of tightness/looseness as expressed by their likelihood of belonging to different categories of VP$IP. Only class 1 sticks out by having a slightly greater likelihood for tight play. In itself, this is also surprising as we were expecting the losing players to be characterized by comparatively looser play than the other players.

In turn, we see how the different player types are markedly distinct in terms of both preflop and postflop aggression expressed by PFR and AF respectively. Classes 1 and 2 have a likelihood of 67 percent of being passive in their preflop game. This likelihood decreases as we go to classes 3 and 4, and class 5, the professional, has 89 percent likelihood of being aggressive in their preflop game. The same trend manifests itself in the postflop game. Class 1 has 92 percent likelihood of playing very passively postflop. Classes 2, 3, and 4 are much less likely to be playing very passively and as we move on to class 5, players are even more aggressive with 41 percent and 52 percent likelihood of being medium or aggressive respectively in their postflop play.

How can we interpret these results? And how should we explain the deviation from our initial hypothesis? Confronted with these results, one of the informants, herself a professional poker player, states:

> This is exactly the beauty of poker. There is no "right" way of play. If you are just good enough reading your opponents and the table, you are still be able to win a lot. Even if you play more than 40 percent of your hands! On the other hand, of course aggression means a great, great deal. For instance, you can't be a winning player just calling all your hands down, as it will be pure luck determining how much you win.

Our analysis shows that different degrees of tightness/looseness may be applied with equal success or failure. There is no typical winning strategy in terms of tightness/looseness. Perhaps we can compare a player's strategic

choice of being tight, semiloose, or loose to a football manager's choice of formation for his team. Managers may choose between a classic 4-4-2 formation, a defensive 4-5-1, an offensive 3-4-3, and a wide range of other combinations, but it is impossible to say on a general level which of these formations is a winning formation. It will depend on the particular team of players, the way the formation is played out, the opposing team, the particular match, and so on.

In similar fashion, a tight poker strategy may be played out in a particular way determining whether it is successful or not, and the same for a loose strategy. And it is part of this "playing out" that we see reflected in the different player types' different degrees of aggression. Of course, there is much more to poker playing than what is reflected in these crude statistical measures. Nevertheless, we see a clear confirmation of the general notion in the poker community that while winning players may be either tight or loose, there is no such thing as a passive winning strategy. The distribution of probabilities in the WinLoss variable shows that there is a gradual progression in the level of success, measured by the probability of losing or winning and of winning small or winning big, as we move through the classes 1 to 5. Class 5 has the highest probability of winning more than $100 of all classes and by far the highest probability of winning more than $1,000, and in class 5 we also find the highest probability of aggressive play both pre- and postflop.

Perhaps the result of our analysis also says something about the current state of poker and about the development of the game over the last few years. Insofar as we have no data from previous years, there is of course a great deal of speculation in this kind of interpretation. Nevertheless, if we take into account the descriptions of the development of the game given by informants in the qualitative interviews, it seems reasonable to argue that the results of the analysis reflect the increase in the general level of skill in the game that has occurred over the last three to five years.

As basic poker theory has become more and more readily available in books and on the Internet and as players already in the game have gained more experience, the percentage of absolute suckers in the game has decreased. Most players today will know the basics of the game, for instance the value of different starting hands, and they will know how to play these hands in the very opening phases of the game. But as a hand of poker progresses over the course of betting rounds, the game becomes more and more complex and the differences between moderately skilled and very skilled players kick in. This is why we see the difference between different

types of poker players reflected not in their degrees of tightness/looseness, which is determined in the preliminary and simplest phase of the game, but in their degrees of aggression, which is an expression of their play in the more advanced and complex phases of the game.

TYPOLOGY OF STYLES

We shall conclude this chapter by summarizing the characteristics of the five different player types identified in the analyses and give an explanation for the names chosen to designate them. We shall be going through the different types not by the order of their numbering in table 4 but by their estimated size.

Leisure players. This is the most frequent type of poker player, comprising 40 percent of the sample. This type of player is playing primarily in micro- and low-stakes games. He is distinctively a leisure player both in terms of his frequency of play and in terms of the amounts of money he loses or wins. The Leisure player is predominantly a losing player, with only 14 percent likelihood of a small win and no likelihood of any bigger wins. In terms of tightness/looseness, he does not differ from the other types except from the Novice. He is predominantly semiloose or loose, but he may also be a tight player. Compared to the other types, again excluding the Novice, the Leisure player has a tendency to play more passively both pre- and postflop. In sum, the Leisure player is modestly skilled with a TP or LP style of playing. In the poker economy, the Leisure player is most likely to figure as a small fish.

ABC player. The ABC player is the second most frequent type, comprising 28 percent of the sample. Like the Leisure player, we find him predominantly in micro- and low-stakes games, but the ABC Player differs from the Leisure player by being more likely to have a medium or high frequency of play. The ABC player is also slightly more successful in his play in terms of money won and lost, as he has 31 percent likelihood of a small win between $10 and $100. He is, however, as likely as the Leisure player to be a loser. The ABC player has the same profile as the Leisure player when we look at tightness/looseness, but there is a tendency for the ABC player to be slightly more aggressive in both pre- and postflop play. The ABC player seems to be slightly more skilled than the Leisure player and his style of play is closer to a potentially profitable TAG or LAG strategy. His designation derives from the fact that his style of playing seems to lie within the spectrum of ABC poker. Even though the ABC player tends to

play more frequently than the Leisure type, the ABC player must also be characterized as a leisure player. In the poker economy the ABC player will probably figure as a fish or as a donkey.

Serious player. The Serious player is the third most frequent type of player, comprising 15 percent of the sample. His profile is very similar to that of the ABC player in regards to frequency of play and style of playing. So the Serious player also lies within the spectrum of TAG or LAG ABC poker. The difference between the two types is that the Serious player is more likely to be playing medium- or high-stakes games. The Serious player is also more likely to be successful in his game, with 68 percent probability of winning between $100 and $1,000 and another 5 percent probability of winning between $1,000 and $10,000. As noted, the inclusion of rake-backs in the calculation of players' results would probably increase the likelihood value of wins above $1,000 since the Serious player has a relatively high frequency of play and also tends to play in medium- and high-stakes games. The Serious player is a skilled player and judging by the level of stakes he is playing and the money he is winning, he is probably situated in a threshold between pure leisure play and more serious play with a professional approach to the game. In the poker economy, the Serious player probably figures as either a shark or a donkey.

Novice player. The Novice type comprises 13 percent of the sample. He plays only a low frequency of hands primarily in micro- and low-stakes games. The Novice is very likely to fall into one of the categories of losing players, with only a 9 percent likelihood of a small win. Surprisingly, he is slightly tighter than the other types of players. In his preflop play he is predominantly passive, and his most marked characteristic is a 92 percent likelihood of being a very passive player postflop. The Novice is a TP or LP player, and he is clearly the weakest of all player types, hence the name. In poker parlance, players with this style of very passive play are also referred to as "calling stations." Even though the Novice is most likely to break even or suffer a small or moderate loss, he still has the greatest likelihood of all types of suffering a very big loss of more than $10,000. In the poker economy, the Novice will probably figure as either a fish or in rare cases as a whale.

Professional player. The last type is designated the Professional. The Professional player has the highest probability of all types of playing in the high-stakes games of $1,000 buy-in and more. It should be noted though, that the difference between the Professional and the Serious player is not very big in terms of their choice of stake levels. However, there is a great

difference in the frequency of play, with the Professional player having 95 percent likelihood of playing more than 500 hands. The Professional player has approximately the same likelihood of being a winning player as the Serious player, but he has a greater likelihood of being in the very top categories of winners. Again, it should be noted that these differences might be even more marked if rake-backs were included in the calculation. The Professional player has a TAG or LAG style of playing, but he is markedly more aggressive than any other type of player. He has 89 percent likelihood of being aggressive preflop and 52 percent likelihood of being aggressive postflop. In his style of playing, he does not assimilate to standard ABC poker in order to rely on basic mistakes in his opponents. His ultraaggressive style is designed to throw opponents off balance and provoke them to make mistakes. If not an outright professional, this type of player seems to have a very professional approach to the game, hence the name. In the poker economy, the Professional player probably figures as a shark.

SIX ♠
     ♣
     ♥
     ♦   A Tough Way to Make an Easy Living

> The most difficult aspects of playing poker professionally are coping emotionally with the losses and coping with the recurring idea that you're not doing anything worthwhile.[1]

Poker differs from most other gambling games such as roulette, slot machines, or craps by being, as we have already explored, a game of skill. It is thus possible to make money playing the game—even "in the long run." Indeed, most players engaging with the game will come out as net losers, but the enormous amounts of money circulating in the poker economy have made poker playing a viable way to make a living for a substantial number of players worldwide. In this chapter, we shall be looking into the peculiar occupation of the professional poker player.

The analysis is partly based on qualitative interviews with poker players.

PROFESSIONALS IN POKER

Professional poker playing is not a new phenomenon. Ever since poker was invented around the turn of the nineteenth century, the game has provided opportunity for people with the appropriate skills to make a living playing cards. In the nineteenth century, card sharps were hustling travelers and merchants on the Mississippi riverboats.[2] In the twentieth century, poker experts were outplaying suckers in Las Vegas and Gardena cards rooms.[3] Today, even though live games still play an important role in the poker

economy, the primary venue for professional poker playing is, of course, the Internet. During the succession of different paradigms in the evolution of poker, which we are going to return to in chapter 10, the professional player has remained an intrinsic feature of the game.

The development of poker and its social setting has obviously changed the conditions for the professional poker player. The most profound change has to do, perhaps, with the sheer magnitude of the phenomenon. As the invention of online poker has made the game easily available for a greater number of people, increasing the amount of money circulating in the globally interconnected poker economy, so have the opportunities to make a living playing poker increased. The poker boom is a recent phenomenon, and little is known about the scope of professional poker playing today. Rough estimates from the informants say anywhere between 300 and 1,000 players in Denmark play poker full-time, with the game being their main source of income.

Another consequence of the introduction of poker on the Internet is a cultural mainstreaming of the game. When the game still required physical presence, players would have to come together at specific sites at specific times. And since poker has had a history of being either completely banned by law or legal only under specific conditions and limitations, playing sites in the past, and especially for "juicy" games with enough money at stake to make them worthwhile for professionals, have typically been situated at the margins of ordinary society.[4] The restriction of serious-stake poker games, exceeding the level of innocent home games, to illegal clubs or secluded territories such as Las Vegas or Gardena made professional poker playing a markedly subcultural phenomenon.

At first, the introduction of online poker did not cause a legalization of poker in areas where it was hitherto banned. However, the virtualization of the game and the placement of web servers in off-shore locations made it difficult for legislators to regulate the game, thus enabling ordinary people to engage in the game without violating the law or entering subcultural communities. The result is that today poker is to some extent a mainstream cultural phenomenon, played by "ordinary" people, receiving the attention of mainstream media. Yet at the same time poker is like other gambling games subject to special rules and regulations still restricting the opportunities to play.

The combination of the increase in the amount of money being fed into the poker economy and the mainstreaming of poker as a cultural phenomenon has had profound effects on the status of professional poker playing.

Previously, professional poker playing was a rare and marginal occupation, but today it constitutes a genuine career opportunity for a great number of people.

Even though professional players constitute only a fraction of the total amount of poker players, probably less than 1 percent, they play a very significant role in the constitution of poker as a cultural phenomenon. However small the number of actual poker players who make a living from the game, it probably exceeds the number of poker players who have not from time to time during their play imagined what it would be like to live as a professional. There is something both absurd and intriguing about the idea of being able to support oneself through card playing. The fact that this idea is not just an impossible utopia but an actual way of life incarnated by real people is an intrinsic part of poker and a major factor in the game's power of attraction.

Another unique feature in poker compared to most other games such as football, tennis, golf, or even chess, where you can also make a living as a professional player, is that the boundaries between professionals and amateurs are completely blurred in poker. In other games, there are typically sharp distinctions between professional games and amateur games. When Roger Federer plays tennis, he plays against Rafael Nadal, Andy Murray, or another professional. When the rest of us amateurs play tennis, we play against our friends, our neighbors, or another amateur player from the local tennis club. In tennis, the two groups of games, professional and amateur, are worlds apart. In poker, however, it is within reach of amateur players willing to risk a few hundred dollars to actually play against professional players. This is most obviously the case in major online tournaments, where amateurs and professionals compete directly against each other. In major live tournaments, amateurs are offered the possibility to participate in the same games as the professionals, either by putting down the buy-in directly or by winning a seat through online satellite qualifiers. And even if you don't actually sit down at the same table as Gus Hansen or Phil Ivey, there is still a sense of being part of the same global poker game.

The significance of the blurring between the worlds of amateurs and professionals for the general perception of the game is illustrated by the impact of Chris Moneymaker, who was then an amateur, winning the World Series of Poker in 2003 after having qualified for the tournament through a $39 online satellite. Along with the development of Internet poker and the emergence of televised poker tournaments, the "moneymaker effect" is often listed as the third major explanatory factor behind

the poker boom. Not only is the poker boom observable in the number of entrants in the WSOP, which increased from 839 in 2003 to 2,576 in 2004 and to a record 8,773 in 2006, but more importantly the turnover in online poker has soared into a staggering $100 million per day.[5]

Since amateurs and professionals are more or less playing in the same global game of poker, the investigation here of the profession of poker playing is also relevant to the understanding of poker playing in general. As we shall see, the skills required by the professional and the challenges he faces are not qualitatively different from what we see in ordinary leisure play. Thus, the professional poker player also serves as an illustrative case for the understanding of the game and its players in general.

THE SEVEN SKILLS OF POKER

What does it take to become a professional poker player? This is a key question that many poker players have tried to figure out. It is also a question addressed in the interviews with both amateur and professional poker players. One interviewee, the manager of a shared office for online players, provided the following answer:

> You can study poker. You need to spend two years doing it. If you have the capacity for learning, you just start with the books, then you go practice, then you go back to the books, then you practice, then you read articles on the Web, watch videos. Then you can make it.
>
> If you don't make it, it is because you are not doing what it says in the books. The recipe is in the books, but something fails. It might be concentration. The [Windows] Messenger beeps. You lose focus. You must stay concentrated. The tilt factor. You must not let yourself become annoyed. If you are a hothead, you lose a link in the chain where everything should connect.

The answer contains a very subtle point about poker and poker playing that may be unveiled through philosophical analysis of the subject, the "you," that figures in the statement. In the first section of the statement, the "you" refers to a purely abstract or intellectual subject—a Cartesian subject, we might add. The point of the first section is that the statistics, logic, and strategy required to become a winning poker player are no more complicated than what most people with a reasonable capacity for learning can pick up. Sure, not everyone has the potential to be a world-class poker player, but from a purely intellectual point of view, it is within the reach of

many people to achieve a level where they could make a living playing poker.

However, in the second section, the "you" of the statement suddenly refers to another kind of subject. This is an actual living subject—a subject embedded in a world of Windows Messenger, e-mail, mobile phones, impatient girlfriends, distractions, emotions, and temper. Philosophically speaking, this is more of a Heideggerian Being-in-the-world. The point is that in order to be a winning poker player, it is not enough to know how you ought to play, you have to actually do it. And in poker, the move from *knowing* to *doing* is not always as simple as it might look. Perhaps you know that you ought to fold ace-eight when the pot is raised before the flop. But then maybe you have not had a playable hand for a while, maybe you have become impatient, maybe the raising player has just bluffed you out of a big pot, making you annoyed with him, maybe you have become distracted by a text message on your phone, and you decide to call instead of folding.

The point is here that poker is not just an intellectual game but also very much a game of emotion, desire, and drive. Poker is indeed a mind game, but at the same time it is a game that challenges a wide register of emotions at a very fundamental level of the player's subjectivity. Mastery of the game at a level where you are able to make enough money to support yourself and perhaps your family implies a mastery of this emotional dimension.

In his seminal study of poker players in Gardena, California, in the late 1970s, David Hayano investigates the complex set of skills required in order to make a living playing poker. Even though the world of poker has evolved dramatically over the last 30 years, many of Hayano's conclusions still serve as valid descriptions of the life and work of professional poker players. In Hayano's vivid accounts of life in the Gardena card rooms, we see that the professional's skills amount to much more than knowing the odds of filling a four-flush or being able to detect a bluff in the opponent's way of pushing her chips into the pot. Here is how he sums up his findings:

> Imagine working at a task where your success or failure depends on a combination of the chancy occurrence of events and the ability to outguess and manipulate others. In this task the minimum condition for survival is the ability to secure and hold on to a playing stake of hard cash. Decisions must be made aggressively and quickly, sometimes in a matter of seconds, or else hundreds or thousands of dollars may be lost. Winning brings on a feeling of power and the sensation that the run of cards and the attack of opponents are well under control. But neither

monetary gain nor success are permanent; they merely represent the peaks of the upswings in an ongoing series of bellshaped fluctuations. When the player is losing, all of these feelings rapidly turn sour. Immediate adjustments must be made to these great swings of elation and depression that, like inseparable twins, accompany big wins and losses. These are the demanding and uncertain qualities of professional poker-playing.[6]

It is in the nature of poker to transgress the boundaries between the game and the reality outside the game. As a gambling game involving money, the outcome of the game may have effects on the player's life outside of the game. At stake in the game are therefore not only the player's status and recognition within the closed value system of the game. A substantial loss may affect the player's ability to pay his bills or otherwise maintain his current standard of living. And conversely, a substantial win may enable the player to improve his life outside of the game.

Furthermore, as other gambling games, the game of poker has a peculiar capacity to engage the player even on an existential level of her subjectivity. A loss may therefore represent more than just a monetary setback. Suffering from a "bad beat" or simply being outplayed by an opponent can have an extreme effect on the emotional constitution of the player. Again, not only the player's identity and status within the game are affected, but her entire existence and her relation to the metaphysical constitution of the world seem to be at stake.

In its transgression of the boundaries of the mere game world, poker seems to simulate a prevalent trend in modern work life. In chapter 10 we are going to see that the "immaterialization of labor" is one of the elements in the transformation from industrial to postindustrial capitalism. In this transformation, dimensions of the worker's (now "employee's") subjectivity are included as resources in the production process that were hitherto referred to the sphere of "the private." Spontaneity, desire, passion, and creativity are no longer obstacles to the efficient execution of the work tasks but rather necessary conditions for the innovation and production of constantly new and improved products. Thus, contemporary forms of management are increasingly concerned with management of the boundary between traditional dichotomies such as work and nonwork,[7] rationality and irrationality,[8] production and consumption,[9] and even work and play.[10] This is also referred to as the management of work-life balance.[11] Rather than separating the two sides of each of these pairs, contemporary man-

agement seeks to integrate them and subsume both as a resource to be mobilized in the company's production of value. In the paradigm of contemporary "human resource management," the whole of the employee's subjectivity is a potential resource to the company and thus a relevant object of management.

One of the symptoms of the effacing of the boundaries between work and nonwork is the emergence of "coaching" as a new paradigm of management. Contrary to previous forms of management, which have allegedly been operating in a paradigm of "control-order-prescription," coaching operates in a paradigm of "acknowledge-create-empower."[12] Instead of trying to program the employee into a predefined execution of work tasks, the idea of coaching is to cultivate the employee's "spontaneous" motivation for productivity and his "natural" commitment to the job, thus aligning the performance of the job with the personal development of the subjectivity of the employee. Acting as coach, the manager assists the employee in successfully and productively integrating all dimensions of his subjectivity within the overall framework of value creation for the company, or in short: managing the boundary between work and life.

Insofar as professional poker play may certainly be regarded as an extreme case of the blurring of boundaries between work and life, it should come as no surprise that we find the phenomenon of coaching in the world of poker. As cofounder of Pokeruniversitetet (Poker University), Tune Seidelin is one of the first poker coaches in Denmark. Inspired by literature on business management,[13] Seidelin identifies seven key skills in the performance of professional poker play.[14] Table 5 gives an overview and explanation of these seven skills.[15] For the purpose of the current analysis, the skills have been ordered in a continuum ranging from game skills to metagame skills.

The concept of game skills refers to skills at navigating within the closed sphere of the game. The concept of metagame skills refers to skills at managing the boundary and relation between the play world of the game and the life outside the game.

The list of skills is a tool for self-evaluation of a player. Mastery of each of the seven skills should be regarded as necessary condition for successful poker play. If a player is weak at mastering even one or two of these skills, this weakness is going to set the upper limit for his overall performance. Thus players are encouraged to work on those skills where they have the lowest level of mastery.

In the context of this chapter, we are going to use the list of seven skills

to structure our analysis of the skills and challenges of professional poker players.

GAME SKILLS

> A knowledge of mathematical probabilities will not make a good poker player, but a total disregard for them will make a bad one.[16]

In chapters 2 and 3, we have already looked into the technical and strategic skills that go into playing poker, such as computing odds, knowing the potentials and risks of different starting hands, reading the board, and so on. While mastery of these skills is certainly a minimal requirement for success in the game, it is not in this dimension that we can recognize the true champions of the game.

The key difference between good and great players is not in the amount of decimals on their calculation of odds but rather in their ability to read opponents and adjust their own play accordingly. In an interview, Seidelin talks about the importance of reading skills:

> If you only follow correct poker strategy without looking at your opponent, you are going to have a small advantage. But if you are able to see that when your opponent does this and this, it means this and this, then you will able to make correct decisions much more often, and your expected hourly profit will go up significantly. But it is also something

TABLE 5.   The Seven Skills of Poker

	Skill	Explanation
Game skills	Technique and strategy	Knowing the odds of the game, how to play different hands pre- and postflop, reading the board, playing position, strategic moves, tournament vs. cash games, etc.
	Reading skills	Reading opponents' hands, putting opponents on a hand range, reading opponents' style of play, managing table image, etc.
	Game selection	Finding games where you have an edge over less skilled players
	Bankroll management	Adjusting the stake level of the games to play according to the size of your bankroll and your level of skill
	Concentration	Staying focused on the game, avoiding distractions
	Tilt control	Managing emotions when facing bad beats, swings, annoying opponents, or other kinds of adversity
Metagame skills	Goal-setting	Know why you play poker, how poker relates to the rest of your life, and what you want to achieve by playing poker. Formulating precise, measurable goals and constantly evaluating the progress of your game in relation to these goals.

very few players are really good at. The other skills, except from tilt control, are easier to master, but reading skills is one of the things that really differentiate all the best players from those who merely manage to get by. It is what makes a good player, because the math . . . everybody knows how to do that.

As we have touched upon previously, reading skills is a mixture of logical deduction and psychological empathy. When the interview persons speak of this kind of skill, they often refer to it in terms of intuition. In the books on poker theory researched for the project, very little specific is written about this crucial aspect of the game. It seems that opponent reading constitutes a kind of mysterious X of poker play, something that is essential in the game but at the same time impossible to put into an exact theory or formula.

In the interviews, the best account of the role of reading skills is given by a player who is making a living from poker without being part of the very elite of the game. Questioned how he experiences playing against players of superior skill, he answers:

> There are some situations in the game that are easy and some that are difficult, and they [the superior players] are good at putting pressure on you in all of those situations, where you are in doubt about the opponent's hand. Every time it is plausible that he has the hand he is representing, I have a problem; every time it is very likely that he may have it, and I feel that it almost cannot be any different. And he can do that with any two cards he wants to. They are good at figuring out how I see them and then use it against me. All the time you feel that they are doing the right thing. And all the time you feel that they put pressure on you when you have a marginal hand yourself. This is the difficult part of playing poker. Holding ace-ace and then hitting an ace on the board is easy. Then it is only a question of getting enough money in the pot. But those times when you hold a medium pair, or top pair with a weak kicker, or anything that is not necessarily good enough . . . they are very good at identifying when to put on pressure and then do it.

In recent years, software has been developed to aid players in their monitoring and reading of opponents. Programs such as Hold'Em Manager and PokerTracker aid online players in monitoring and identifying flaws in opponents' play by collecting and processing data on the hands they are playing. Rather than eliminating the importance of reading skills or turning the art of opponent reading into a mechanical procedure, these programs seem

to have become an integrated part of the game online and to have pushed the limit where intuition takes over from mathematical calculation. Again, the software programs may improve good players' edge over mediocre players, but they cannot help beat excellent players. Here is how one semi-professional player explains the role of the programs:

> You should not rely too much on these programs because you must mix your style of playing. If you do not vary your game, you are going to lose over time because the programs are good at telling what you are expected to do, and other players are going to read you. However, if you mix up your game, the programs do not add much value. But then if you are able to mix up your game so much that you cannot be read, you are at a pretty high level anyway. There are not many players up there.

In table 5, we find game selection as the next skill. This skill, which is most relevant for online cash game players, is an extension of opponent reading. Based on the simple calculation that a player can only expect to profit from a game if he has an edge on his opponents, game selection is the skill of identifying games with opponents less skilled than the player himself. On-line, "soft" tables can be identified by looking at the average pot size of a table or the average percentage of players who see the flop. If these figures deviate from certain norms, it is an indication that there are weak players at the table. Skilled players may also select specific tables in order to target specific individual opponents on whom they have specific statistics or whom they know from experience they can beat. Software programs such as Smart Buddy can aid players in this kind of table selection.

Several of the interview persons reported that the general level of skill among poker players has increased considerably over the course of the last three to five years as knowledge of poker theory and strategy has become more widespread. In other words, there are today fewer fish and less easy money floating around in the poker economy. One of the interview persons, a successful online professional with current annual winnings of approximately $300,000, even predicts that in the future, poker playing will cease to be a viable way to make a living for her and many others:

> I play primarily online poker, but I don't think it is going to survive much longer. It has received a lot of attention from the government and they are trying to ban it one way or the other. Furthermore, players improve and everyone becomes constantly better. Hence, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the same level of winnings as the previous year. So I think it is going to become more difficult to make a living

from poker, at least if you play Texas Hold 'Em. Then you probably have to switch to Omaha. I think less and less people are going to make a living from the game.

Whether these predictions are going to hold or not is difficult to say. However, there is little doubt that the importance of proper game-selection skills and discipline has increased over recent years for players relying on a steady income from poker and will continue to do so in the future.

Technical/strategic skills, opponent-reading skills, and game selection skills are at the end of the continuum in table 5 designated as game skills. They are skills at navigating within the play world of the game of poker. However, even though a player possesses the knowledge and intellectual capacity required to figure out how to play poker at a certain level, this does not automatically mean that he always plays up to his standard. As the game engages and challenges the player on an emotional and existential level, he may find himself acting against strategies and plays he would otherwise consider optimal. In order to be successful over the course of the several hours or days of a poker game, and over the months and years of a poker career, a professional player must also devise metagame skills to manage the boundary and balance between the game world of poker and the rest of his life.

BANKROLL MANAGEMENT

> More than any other danger, the legitimate professional gambler must contend with his greatest occupational hazard—losing his entire bankroll, busting out, going Tap City.[17]

An old saying on gambling goes like this: "Never gamble with money you cannot afford to lose." Bankroll management in poker is basically an elaborate version of this principle.

A poker player's bankroll is the sum of money he has set aside for gambling, that is, the sum of money he has decided that he can afford to lose. However, if you are a professional player with the intent of winning money in the game over the course of a longer stretch, this means that you cannot afford to gamble your entire bankroll in a single game of poker. Besides his skills, a player's bankroll is his only asset, and it is a necessary tool for the execution of his trade. Therefore, the professional poker player has to protect his bankroll.

A distinct feature of poker is the residue of chance, which cannot be

controlled by skill. Even though a professional player does all the right things, plays in the right games, sticks to the proper strategies, makes the correct moves, he may be the subject of unfortunate events and end up losing at the game anyway. This is referred to as the "natural variance" of the game. When this occurs to a player for a longer period of time, it is referred to as a "downswing" or just a "swing." When players put some of their money at stake in a game, they have to take into account this variance and keep enough money in reserve to endure a downswing without busting their bankroll. Thus, proper bankroll management requires the player participate only in games with a buy-in of less than a certain percentage of his entire bankroll. A rule of thumb says that the bankroll requirement for a NL Texas Hold 'Em cash game is 20 times the maximum buy-in.[18] For example, the buy-in for a $3–$6 game is $600 and to play in this game the player needs a $60,000 bankroll. Since variance is much higher in tournament play, a player should have at least 75 times the buy-in to participate in a major multitable tournament.

The mechanics of bankroll management prescribe that as a player becomes more and more experienced, his winnings will add to his bankroll, thus allowing him to play in games at a higher level of stake. If he is skilled enough to be consistently winning at the new level, to be a "regular," the increase in the stakes will result in a more profitable return on his "investment." However, if he is not good enough to be playing at the higher level, his bankroll automatically decreases to a point where he should go back to playing at a lower level.

To a larger degree than any of the previously described skills, bankroll management is a metagame skill. The basic purpose of bankroll management is separating the player's "poker money" from her "living money." This is not only a precaution against busting her private economy; it is also a precondition for playing optimally in the game. "In order to play high-stakes poker, you need to have a total disregard for money," says Doyle Brunson.[19] By establishing a separation between the money in the game and the money outside the game, the player suspends her ordinary attitude and respect for money, thus allowing her to make decisions in the game based purely on strategic reasons. One interview person, an online professional and a regular at $2–$4 and $3–$6, explains:

> When I advance to $5–$10 in some games, terrible things happen in my mind—those round pieces on the table transform themselves from being chips into being money. This is not supposed to happen. It is simply

a no-go. Because at that moment I become aware that I have just lost the value of actual physical things. It must always be these play-chips that I am playing for. It is a way of mentally cheating myself.

Bankroll management is very easy to perform in theory. You hardly even need a pocket calculator to figure out the level of games in which you can play. In practice, however, it can be extremely difficult to stick to the rules of sound bankroll management. These difficulties provide good illustrations of the way poker is not easily contained within a secluded game-world.

A common problem among poker players who achieve great success very quickly is that they fail to take the necessary precautions when things are going well. They gain a sense of being invincible that makes it seem unnecessary to submit to the rules of bankroll management. An experienced online professional, who plays with other players in a shared office space, tells a story that is far from being unique:

> We had a guy in here, the youngest, who was just powering ahead. He was playing $50-$100 and he had made more than $500,000. He lost almost everything in half a year. It was Icarus being burned by the sun. But he realized that he had bad bankroll management. He had gone to the next level as soon as he had a little to gamble. He had been taking shots, and as it went well he took the next and the next and the next, and that also went well. But at some point you cannot avoid going into a downspin, where you are just unlucky. It happens to everybody. That's the variance. It is higher than you think. And perhaps he didn't have the skill to be playing at that level. He hadn't been working on his theory. So he crashed completely. Now he is building himself up again and he is getting ahead again. It looks reasonably good.

In a previous chapter, the stratification of cash games into different layers of stake levels, that is, NL $100, NL $200, NL $400, etc., was described as a pyramid. Among poker players, and professional poker players in particular, this stratification is also a hierarchy. The numbers are not just quantitative measures of the stakes in the game but also designations of a player's place in the hierarchy of the business. For some players, the level of stake at which they are playing becomes an important point of identification for themselves and a source of recognition from peers:

> It can be difficult to move to a lower level and recognize that it is not just a matter of variance. Many poker players are emotionally involved

in it and they are building their identity around it. It is part of who they are. If they have to move down a step, it is like losing an arm. The extent to which different people identify with playing on a particular level varies; if you identify yourself as a regular at $5–$10 [NL $1,000 with small and big blinds of $5 and $10], if you identify yourself as a poker player, or . . . in my case, I don't even see myself as a poker player. I play poker, but I don't see myself as a poker player. So it is very different. (Interview with Seidelin)

As players identify with the level of stake at which they are playing, moving down when they start losing at their usual level becomes not only a matter of calculation but also an existential issue. If you are a professional in other types of games such a football or tennis, there is an automatic correspondence between the quality of your recent performances and the level at which you are playing the game. If you perform badly in football over the course of a significant period of time, either your team will lose and be relegated to a lower division or you yourself are deselected and moved to a secondary team. In poker, performance and level of the game are not as immediately coupled since players may decide to play at a level beyond their current abilities.

One of the unique features of poker is that the game allows players to ascribe wins to the superiority of their own skills and losses to "natural variance," "a bad run of cards," or simply "bad luck." Thus, self-evaluation of a player's performance takes a high degree of discipline and self-recognition. If a player has invested a big part of his identity in being "a regular at $5–$10," it may be tempting to explain away a series of bad results at this level as an instance of variance instead of admitting to a deterioration of skills and move down in stakes in order to recoup losses.

One interview person who had recently started his career as a professional online-player illustrates the difficulties of self-evaluation:

IP: When you play a lot of poker, it is important not to let yourself become too influenced by your results. For instance, three days ago I had one of my best days ever. I went home with a $13,000 win for the day. The following day, I managed to lose $11,000. It was because I was bloody unlucky. I could see from my all-in log just how unlucky I had been. I could see that I ought to have won $10,000 more than I actually did. I should have gone home as a minor loser.

OB: How about the day before. Were you lucky then?

IP: No, it went well. It wasn't because I was lucky. It was just a good day. When you play a lot of poker, it is very important not to let yourself become too influenced by whether you win or lose.

Whether the player here is giving an objective account of his performance is trying to deceive himself it is impossible to judge—for the interviewer and probably for the player himself.

When players decide which level of stake to play, two desires or motivations may collide. One is the desire to earn a steady income; the other is the desire to compete and put their skills to the test. In all of the interview persons, both dimensions seemed to be present in the players' engagement with the game. However, there was a difference in balance between the two dimensions between different players. One interview person describes how this balance has shifted over the course of his career:

When I started playing poker, I went in to become one of the best. This was why I played. I did not play in order to round up money. If you draw two graphs, they have probably crossed since then. I was probably also a little younger back then. I would have been 24 years old. At that age you still have some youthful idealism, and then as you get older you realize that you also need some money to pay the bills. And you realize that you are not going to be the best in the world. That was what I wanted back then, so I played against all the best online—that is, those who were the best back then. I have played almost every level of stake. I have played cash games with blinds of $100 and $200 and buy-in of $20,000, and I have played every level below that.

If you play to prove your skills, you want to play against the best in the game. This desire may push you beyond the level of the game, where you have an edge against the other players, thus making the game unprofitable. However, in the case of this interview person, the shift of balance toward a more profit-oriented approach to the game allows him to run tighter bankroll management now. He continues:

I have eventually become pretty aware that the game has evolved quicker than I have developed myself, since I have moved further and further down in the level where I can win. . . . For the moment I am playing 400 euros [maximum buy-in of 400 euros]. I used to play 1,000 but it didn't go very well so now I'm playing 400 instead. And actually, it doesn't mean anything. Two to three years ago I would have been bothered going down, but now it is okay. I just want to make my money.

Bankroll management transcends the level of mere game skills. Both in terms of money and in terms of identity, bankroll management is a matter of managing the boundary between game and life. In terms of money, proper bankroll management is about securing the border between poker economy and private economy, allowing an optimal investment of the player's bankroll while at the same time securing a sufficient buffer to protect against the natural variance of the game. In terms of identity, bankroll management is a matter of containing the player's desire to compete and to gain recognition among peers and to make sure his identification with his place in the hierarchy of the poker economy does not make him risk his entire bankroll.

The next skill in table 5 is concentration. This is probably the one skill least particular to poker and therefore also least interesting to the analysis. Concentration is basically about focusing only on factors that are relevant to the game situation, that is, shutting out the external world while playing. In online play, this skill sometime boils down to simple things such as turning off the TV or not checking emails while playing poker.

Among professional poker players there seems to be an overrepresentation of former elite athletes. A notable example is of course Doyle Brunson, who was a very promising basketball player until his knee was accidentally injured. It seems reasonable to suggest that continued concentration and the ability to stay focused in a situation of great pressure is one of the skills that translate from the world of physical sports to the world of poker.

TILT, SWINGS, BAD BEATS, AND DONKCALLS

> Bad beats go against all the principles on which good poker is based: logic, calculation, percentages, and the immutable laws of probability. They are as irrational as dreams, and they haunt you like nightmares. You brood about them, you complain about them, you play them over in your head again and again. And this is how it should be, because while it is happening a truly bad beat feels like a waking nightmare.[20]

When chess master Garry Kasparov was at the height of his career, he finished first in 15 consecutive professional tournaments from 1981 to 1990. This record still holds today. A similar winning streak in poker is unthinkable. The chance factor of the game means that even the very best poker players stand to lose frequently. Losing is an integrated part of being

a winning player in poker. This means losing individual pots in a tournament or session, losing entire sessions or tournaments, or even losing money over periods of weeks or months. An important part of being not just a good but a great poker player is the ability to cope with losses and deal with adversity. Here is how one interview person, who plays professionally both online and live, talks about this quality of a player:

> A player's true self is revealed in his way of dealing with adversity. Many, many players handle it very poorly and it is one of the most important aspects of poker play. Besides playing the game well and selecting the right tables, poker is also about handling downswings. This is a very good indicator on a poker player. If I meet someone for the first time and I know very little about him, I have a very sure indication on him after having talked to him for five minutes, if he is telling me about lost hands. But if there is a person at the table, not commenting on losses and receiving giant beats at the table, without showing signs of being affected, he commands great respect.

When a player and his game are thrown off by a loss in some form, this is commonly referred to as "tilt." The phenomenon of tilt is something characteristic to poker, and the analysis of tilt reveals some of the very intrinsic and defining features of the game.

The concept of tilt derives from another game, the game of pinball. When a player knocks, tips, pushes, or otherwise moves a pinball machine, the machine will shut down and go into a state of "tilt," immediately terminating the game. In poker, "Tilt is simply the act of playing worse than you are capable of playing."[21] While being on tilt causes a player to play badly or at least below his normal standard, all bad play is not necessarily caused by tilt. Some players play badly simply because they don't know how to play any better.

Tilt typically happens when the player is emotionally upset or frustrated and he lets his decisions in the game become influenced by these emotions. A player may be emotionally thrown off balance by any number of situations. Poker authors Taylor and Hilger make the following list of potentially tilt-inducing situations: "Any emotional state (not just the stereotypical anger depression, and self-pity); Fatigue or tiredness; Boredom; An unusual game state; An abnormal series of results; Alcohol."[22] In the following, we shall be concerned only with game-endogenous tilt-inducing situations, that is, situations brought about by events within the game. These are typically situations involving a loss in one form or an-

other. The reason for this narrowing of the focus is that this kind of situation is the most characteristic of poker and thus the most interesting to our analysis.

Judging from the literature on tilt and the accounts of the interview persons, three phenomena seem to be typical causes for players to go on tilt: "bad beats," "donkcalls," and "swings." Let us start with an account from an interview person:

> I would like to tell you about a loss I suffered yesterday. It felt really bad and I was furious afterward. I couldn't sleep because I was so angry. It wasn't a particularly big tournament, but there was still a reasonable amount of money for first and second place. We are 21 players left and I have a relatively big stack. The 20 best players are in the money. I haven't had a single good hand in the whole tournament, but I have been kind of a bully. And then finally I pick up those two aces. I bet out from late position but another player goes all-in. He is thinking that I have to fold unless I'm holding an absolute monster, because I am one place from being in the money. I call and he is holding jack-six—a terrible hand. It's a good move by him because unless I'm holding queens, kings, aces, or ace-king I have to fold in that spot. There is so much money in the pot and then of course he hits two jacks. That feeling is really hard. You have been sitting there for three to four hours and then finally you do something and you have the feeling that now you did something good. And you had almost secured yourself a place in the final with a good stack on the final table. Instead you just get beat. That is just unfair.

This is a classic example of a *bad beat*. Bad beats occur when a player plays a hand according to sound strategy and statistically stands to win the hand but nevertheless ends up losing the hand because the opponent gets lucky. Before the flop, when both players go all in, the player here is a huge statistical favorite with an approximate 86 percent likelihood of winning the hand. However, the opponent catches two lucky cards to take down the pot against the odds.

From a purely objective point of view, there is nothing mysterious about bad beats. Even though statistics tells us that a player stands to win a hand, no natural laws are broken when he does not. It is merely the result of the stochastic nature of the game. But poker players are not objects. They are subjects. And thus bad beats may pose a serious challenge to the constitution of their subjectivity within the game.

In the "ordinary world" outside the game, we usually operate on the assumption that there is a certain correspondence between the quality of an act and the positive or negative consequences of the act. If we act morally toward other people, we expect some form of recognition or appreciation. If we do a good piece of work, we expect to be paid in the form of money, prestige, power, respectability, and so on. And if we perform well in sports or another game we expect this to be reflected in a win or at least a good result. In some religious systems, we even find the figure of a God as someone who keeps the checks and balances on the deeds of the individual in order to ensure that acts that are not properly rewarded or punished in the present life will be settled in the hereafter.

This ordinary approach to the world is severely challenged in the domain of poker and especially when a player faces a bad beat. The difficulty of accepting a bad beat is the feeling that you have done everything right, but still you lose. It is noteworthy how often players speak about bad beats in moral or legal terms, such as "unfair," "injustice," or "being punished." Even though on an intellectual level they are fully aware that there is no such thing as fairness or justice in poker, their emotions compel them to project onto the game some form of justice or moral principle. They cannot let go of the feeling that they "deserve" to win the pot since they have played the hand "correctly."

Situations where one player is a major statistical favorite to win a hand with more cards to come often occur because of weak play by the opponent. As we have already elaborated in chapter 5, a typical error in less skilled players is calling too much instead of folding or even raising. A weak player may decide to call an all-in bet before the flop with king-queen, call a bet on the flop when he catches a middle pair, call a pot-sized bet on the turn when he has only four outs to complete an inside straight draw, or make similar types of "incorrect" play. This kind of play is sometimes referred to as a "donkcall." The concept derives from the reference to weak players as donkeys.

Normally, this kind of play is welcomed by stronger players as it lets them profit on their superior skills. However, the beauty (or the horror—whichever way you look at it) of poker lies in the fact that sometimes you may win even when you play your hand contrary to the most fundamental rules of strategy. This means that sometimes the weak player beats the stronger player with a donkcall as the cards come out against the odds.

When this happens, the superior player may suffer from an emotional impact comparable or perhaps even worse than in the case of the regular

bad beat. Not only must he deal with the disappointment of losing the hand despite having played the hand optimally. In addition, he has to face his opponent being "rewarded" for an "incorrect" or even downright stupid play. This is illustrated by one of the interview persons, who explains what makes him go on tilt:

> It is the randomness in the game and the feeling of injustice that you get, when you know that you have done everything right and then lose to a man who hasn't. When you analyze the hand, you see how you have been completely right and you have done the right thing all the way through. He, on the contrary, has made mistake after mistake. But he wins. That is not justice to me. Then when it happens a number of times in a row then . . . It is not so much the fact that I lose the money or that I lose the hand. It is the fact that bad play, sometimes idiotic play, is rewarded at the expense of rational play. It is the defeat of reason. It is also the failure of my attempt to communicate with another person. I can see that he did not understand the first thing of what I have been telling him through my bets and my play since he is calling with the crap he is holding. And then he hits something ridiculous. Then it is just bloody unfair.

Psychiatrist and gambler Richard J. Rosenthal elaborates on the phenomenon of a bad beat:

> In response to a bad beat, the gambler usually feels cheated, and this may be an important aspect of what is so unacceptable about it. Bad beats are an insult to one's sense of "how things should be." There is a sense of injustice, of loyalty betrayed. The gambler feels: "I have done my part, and played by the rules, and someone has cheated me."[23]

If a player gets aces cracked or suffers another kind of bad beat once in a session, he may be able to shake off the disappointment in a matter of seconds and perhaps even laugh at the whimsical moods of chance. The second time it happens he may be able to do the same, perhaps without the laugh though. But sometime, when it happens for the third, fourth, fifth, or tenth time even the most rational and cool player may give in to the growing feeling that the cards are not dealt in a completely random fashion anyway and that right now he has been chosen by the "poker gods" as the victim of one of their malicious plots.

As the number of bad beats accumulates within a short period of time in a player's game and it is reflected in a decline in her average daily, weekly, and monthly results, it is known as a "downswing" or simply just a "swing."

Because of the natural variance of the game, swings are inevitable in the career of a professional player. The challenge of the professional player is therefore not to eliminate swings altogether but rather to prevent them from affecting the quality of his play. This is done by always maintaining the perspective of the long run.

It is, however, very difficult to accept a series of bad beats as merely the meaningless outcome of a random sequence of events. To make sense of the bad beat, the presence of some quasi-metaphysical authority in the shape of "Lady Luck" or the "poker gods" is sometimes projected onto the game. This lets the player grasp the bad beats as an expression of a momentary disfavor of these authorities. It also provides the player with an object for the severe emotions he may be experiencing as he is suffering from the bad beat. He may now direct feelings of anger, hatred, injustice, blame, or having been affronted toward the game as if the game itself were a moral agent.

Rosenthal lists a series of four typical responses to bad beats. These responses may occur singly or in combination:

> 1. denial ("This isn't happening. This isn't real.") 2. personalization and anger ("Why is this happening to me?") 3. external attribution and increased superstitiousness, and 4. undoing. The latter, of course, is the need to deny what occurred by winning one's money back. Gambling strategies and methodical play are abandoned; one has to undo what happened "all at once."[24]

These responses are what constitutes the state of "being on tilt." Each of the responses constitutes a symptom that the player has abandoned a purely rational and strategic view of the game. The player has lost the perspective of the long run. Instead, he is trying to get even with the game at once. His play is determined by his feelings of injustice and unfairness rather than strategic calculation.

As several of the interview persons note, all players experience these feelings and all players go on tilt from time to time. The crucial point, however, is how players deal with these emotions and how they prevent the emotions from interfering too much with their play. Several of the interview persons explain that a great part of their improvement as poker players has consisted in minimizing the impact of tilt on their game.

> The point about tilt is minimizing it when it comes. You cannot avoid it completely. In the beginning of my career, I could be on tilt for hours, but now my occasional tilt-phases last only 5 to 10 minutes.

Another player explains that his failure to manage tilt has made the difference between making a living playing poker and getting rich playing poker.

> You might say I have been one of the best in the country at going on tilt and losing control. I have lost an incredible amount of money due to irritation, frustration, bad mood, etc. This is one of the reason I might lose my edge over other players in the long run. If I'm throwing away a lot of buy-ins in one day, it takes me a long time to win it back. Say my edge gives me an expected win of 30 buy-ins per month and I then lose 10 or 15 in a day, that is half my average surplus of the month. It is sad to think about the amount of money it has cost me years back. This is money I am probably not going to see again because the game has become so much tougher. It bugs me thinking about losing $50,000–$60,000 on that. That is the down payment on a large car, a flat, or something else. I am probably one of the best players at throwing away a lot of money sometimes, and this is why I don't have the money today that I ought to.

Poker coach Tune Seidelin explains the skill of tilt control:

> Tilt control is about emotion management. It is one of the skills that I have had most difficulties explaining to players because it is very difficult for many players to deal with. Many poker players become emotionally involved in the game and they make decisions that basically they know are bad. I think I'm starting to figure out things to do about it. For instance, just being aware of what is happening. You have a stress threshold. When you move beyond this threshold, you start acting irrationally. So you have to find out what triggers you and what brings you beyond the threshold. And when you become aware that you are emotionally affected you may step back and either leave the game or start acting rationally again by making sure that you are emotionally balanced. (Interview with Seidelin)

The emotions triggered by bad beats are sometimes very strong. As we shall be looking into later, the state of tilt may become permanent in a player, transforming her from a winning into a losing player and perhaps even into a problem gambler. The phenomenon of bad beat and tilt illustrates yet another dimension of the way poker challenges the boundary between game-world and ordinary world. The emotions evoked by a bad beat cannot be reduced to a simple disappointment of having lost the hand. It seems that very basic moral sentiments of fairness and justice in the player's

subjectivity are provoked. As Rosenthal puts it, bad beats insult the player's sense of "how things should be."

In philosophical terms, bad beats demonstrate the aporia of the symbolic order. When a player has his aces cracked against all odds because his opponent catches two jacks to complete a set, it shows that the Law of Great Numbers is incapable of predicting single instances. It is an opening of the ontological gap between the symbolic and the real. The symbolic order of sound poker strategy is sustained by the fantasy of the long run. Donkcalls may be viewed as an abandoning of this fantasy. The donkey calls a bet despite the fact that the call does not have a positive expected value in the long run. He is not following the standard rules of the symbolic order. However, when he fills a lucky draw and wins despite his incorrect play, it is a demonstration of the fragility of the symbolic order. The weak player is not immediately "punished" for his deviation from correct play. Hence, the confidence of the skilled player, having played correctly but nevertheless lost the hand, in the rationality of the symbolic order is momentarily challenged. Only as long as he is able to maintain his belief in the fantasy of the long run will he be able to retain his confidence in the symbolic order of probability theory and poker strategy.

However, the fantasy of the long run is a hazy and almost metaphysical idea. It belongs in the register of the imaginary. Therefore, it takes a strong belief and power of imagination to stick to this fantasy if the number of bad beats keeps accumulating. Bad beats costing hundreds or even thousands of dollars are very concrete, whereas the fantasy of the long run is equally abstract. When a player is stuck in a downswing, his need to make sense of the things happening may compel him to exchange the fantasy of the long run, which does not currently seem to correspond to the events in the real, with a fantasy of the poker gods or Lady Luck being particularly unfriendly toward him. Once he caves in to this need and starts playing accordingly, he is definitely on tilt and his downswing has gained self-propelling momentum.

There is something in the phenomenon of bad beats comparable to the challenges faced by very strong religious believers. If you believe in God and believe that God is both good and omnipotent, how do you explain the existence of evil and injustice in the world?[25] This is not only a philosophical but also an existential problem. Say you believe firmly in the Christian God and your little child dies in an unfortunate accident. How do you retain your belief in a God who will let this kind of injustice happen in the

world? You may indeed insist that God moves in mysterious ways and that there is in the accident some kind of meaning that is beyond the scope of human comprehension. This is one of the solutions provided by theology. But you may also decide that if this kind of thing can really happen in the world, either God does not exist, or if he does exist, he is either a complete asshole or an impotent wimp. Thus the experience of losing a child (or something similarly horrible) may cause you to lose you faith in God and change your way of life accordingly.

What happens to the poker player going on tilt due to a series of a bad beats is that in similar fashion events in the real seem to contradict the laws according to which he otherwise structures his game, and perhaps his life in general. Even though probability theory provides straightforward intellectual explanations for the bad beats (just as theology provides intellectual explanation for the death of a child), this may not be enough to restrain the emotional impact suffered by the player. He looses his faith in the laws of good poker strategy and changes his game accordingly.

Although a player on tilt may change his game in many different directions, the most typical symptom of tilt is for a player to loosen up, that is, play a wider range of hands than he would normally do, and to take greater chances in his game, for instance, by calling with hands he would have normally folded or raising more frequently with weak hands in order to bluff opponents. When this happens, the player lets go of the strict mathematical and strategic approach to poker and starts playing the game as if it were merely a game of chance.

One interview person makes the following diagnosis of tilt: "Tilt is a mini-psychosis." This is actually a very precise clinical account of the phenomenon. The Lacanian definition of psychosis may be summarized:

> Psychosis . . . results from a child's failure to assimilate a "primordial" signifier which would otherwise structure the child's symbolic universe, that failure leaving the child unanchored in language, without a compass reading on the basis of which to adopt an orientation.[26]

Under normal circumstances, the player's approach to the game is highly structured by the symbolic order of probability theory and poker strategy. But when he goes on tilt, he loses his "anchoring" in this "language of poker" and he starts playing "without a compass reading" of the game. In clinical terms, the bad beat functions as a traumatic event that the player is unable to integrate into his symbolic universe, thus moving him into a state comparable to psychosis.

WORK AND PLAY

> We play because poker is like business—without the conference calls.
> (Commercial ad for FullTiltPoker.com)

There is a curious ambiguity in poker in relation to the distinction between work and play. For most players, especially those just starting, poker is a recreational leisure activity. The unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of the game constitutes an exciting antipole to a predictable and rational work life full of duties and responsibilities. Furthermore, many professionals say the desire to escape the routines of ordinary work life is a key reason for their decision to pursue poker as a way of life. Here is how Doyle Brunson explains his choice of career: "I was never going to have a boss. I was going to make my way through life *my way*."[27] And Alvarez sums up the Vegas professionals' attitude toward their profession:

> The risk, challenge, and solitariness of their profession are a source of intense pride. Ask them about the lure of the way they live, and they talk about being free, outside the system, unanswerable to any boss; they tell you that they alone decide when they work and for how long.[28]

Even though these statements are more than 25 years old they still resonate with the accounts given by the interview persons, who are professionals in the contemporary world of poker. They also state the desire for autonomy, being able to decide when and where to work, and not having to answer to any bosses.

Life as a professional poker player does indeed entail a high degree of freedom, but there seems to be built into the profession and the game of poker itself the very opposite of freedom. On the one hand, playing poker on an advanced level is very much an exercise of intellectual ability and creativity. On the other hand, there is also a strong element of repetition and routine even in advanced poker playing. This is perhaps most obvious in the case of online poker.

Many midlevel professional poker players make their money on $400 buy-in and $2,000 buy-in cash games. In order to generate a profit big enough to make a living at this level, players usually play a number of tables simultaneously, typically between four and eight, but in rare cases some players are able to handle up to 12 or 16 tables at the same time. As we have already touched upon, it has become commonplace for players to use PokerTracker or similar software programs to aid them in their reading of other players. In this universe of computer-aided multi-tabling on-

line poker, the vast majority of moves are reduced to simple routine acts and only occasional game situations require the intellectual and creative engagement of the human player. This is best exemplified by the fact that online poker sites may sometimes post a simple question to multi-tabling players that they will have to answer in order to keep playing. The purpose of these questions is to function as a kind of Türing test determining whether the player is actually human or whether he is a robot.

One of the characteristics of assembly line work is that it is very close to the kind of work that may be performed by a machine. It is thus tempting to raise the question whether poker playing is in fact merely an advanced form of assembly line work. If this were the case it would certainly introduce an ironic twist to the profession of poker playing. Professional poker players would then find themselves performing a kind of work that represents the least attractive part of that very capitalist system they wanted to escape in the first place. Holden makes the following observation on this question: "One week, poker is an escape from work; the next, it *is* work."[29]

However, there is no simple answer to the question of whether poker playing is in fact a tedious activity comparable to assembly line work. It seems, rather, that the scope of the game itself is wide enough to contain both elements of intellectual excellence, creativity, and spontaneity and elements of mindless routine work. Again, it is a key challenge for the player to manage the boundary and interplay between these two sides of the poker coin.

If we look at the skills of poker reviewed hitherto in this chapter and especially the metagame skill of tilt control, it may seem that poker is all about eliminating and excluding emotions from the game. Yet if we expand the view of the player to include the full human being, the issue of emotion management becomes less clear cut. This is indicated by the last type of skill in table 5, *goal-setting*.

Goal-setting is about relating poker to the rest of the player's life. When setting goals, the player is forced to reflect on his motivations for playing the game and to consider whether his game actually corresponds to these motivations. Even though players should be able to keep emotions of impatience, frustration, disappointment, anger, and so on from interfering with their game, it is crucial that they remain in touch with their emotional motivation for playing the game in the first place.

In the interviews, a common answer to the question "Why do you play poker?" was a spontaneous "Because it's fun." And indeed a common trait among those of the interviewees who were most successful was a profound

joy in playing. In order to become and also remain a professional poker player, it is not enough to have a strong desire to be a professional. You simply have to enjoy playing poker. Below is an excerpt of an interview with an online professional, who plays $1,000 buy-in and 2,000 buy-in cash games. She plays poker approximately 35 hours per week:

OB: Why do you play poker?

IP: I just do because I think it is fun. I have always thought it was fun. I always liked playing card and I was playing whist from when I was a little girl. When the poker boom came, my husband and I started together. We had fun doing it and it was a common hobby. We discussed the game and spent a lot of time on it until we realized we were good at it. Then it escalated and we found out we could make a living from it, which was cool.

I: So how did it transform from being a hobby to being what it is today?

OB: I still think it is a hobby because I only play when I feel like it. But then again, I often feel like it because I think it is fun.

This ambiguity of the relation between emotions and poker is referred to by Taylor and Hilger in their book *The Poker Mindset* as "the emotional paradox of poker":

The Poker Mindset talks about removing all emotion from decisions. By removing your emotions, you avoid going on tilt to help maximize your expectations at the table. The problem is that emotions are one of the things that make poker fun. It should be exciting when a crucial card is coming on the river. You should be happy when you win a big pot and disappointed when you lose. When you completely remove emotions from the game, you end up with a bland game that is more like an exercise in intermediate mathematics than the thrilling, adrenaline-pumping roller coaster that it can be. Whether or not this is a bad thing depends on your point of view, but it certainly removes an element of the game that some people enjoy.[30]

Goal-setting and the type of reflections encouraged here definitely belong at the very endpoint of the continuum between game skills and metagame skills. We might even question whether this kind of skill is an ethical rather than a poker skill. In this context, "ethical" refers to the quality of shaping one's life as a whole. Is it possible to be an excellent and profiting poker player even if you have managed to remove all emotion from the game and

you do not enjoy the playing anymore? There does not seem to be any un-ambiguous answer to this question, and the point is here rather that the emotional paradox of poker is something any professional poker player has to solve or at least learn to handle for himself. Whether a lack of this skill means that the player loses money at the poker table or that he loses some-thing outside of the poker table is probably better left as an open question.

Here is how one interview person, an online professional, reflects on his life and profession:[31]

> Personally, I have always speculated whether poker is work, compul-sion, lifestyle, or a sleeping pillow to me. Am I a modern bohemian—enjoying an alternative lifestyle with unlimited freedom in time and space—or a sad addict—who has experienced losing 1,000,000 crowns in 24 hours and taking a walk at eight o'clock in the morning, after the blunder of the night, while ordinary people on their bikes drive through the rain on their way to work, in the opposite direction?

♣

♥

♦ Why Do People Play Poker?

> Poker is life. Human interaction. The interaction of desires. All of life,
> except love, can be found in the game. And not all of life can or should
> be about love.[1]

Poker is a game of cards and money but it is also a game of desire, drive,
enjoyment, and fantasy. When a player sits down in a game of poker, he is
at the same time engaging in a specific structuring of his subjectivity.

In the preceding three chapters, we have been looking into different
ways of ordering poker players into different classes and hierarchies. In
chapter 4, we described the pyramidic ordering of poker players into dif-
ferent categories of winners and losers, and in chapter 5, we classified dif-
ferent styles of playing. In chapter 6, we analyzed the skills that determine
a player's position in the hierarchy of the poker economy and constitute the
difference between professional players and nonprofessional players.

The purpose of the current chapter is to produce yet another typology
of poker players. This is a typology of the different ways in which the sub-
jectivity of a poker player may be constituted. Different players have dif-
ferent approaches to the game, not only in terms of their style of playing,
their level of skill, but also in their very motivation for engaging in the
game. This is what we shall be looking into in the current chapter.

The chapter also serves as an integration of some of the previous analy-
ses in the book. We shall be returning to the philosophical framework, set
up in chapters 1, 2, and 3, and we shall be using this framework in relation
to the quantitative and qualitative analyses of chapters 4, 5, and 6.

IDEAL TYPES OF POKER PLAYING

In part 1 we saw how Žižek's triad of real, symbolic, and imaginary translates into three different dimensions in the constitution and playing of poker. The dimension of the real is constituted by the element of chance; the dimension of the symbolic is constituted by mathematical and logical calculations; and the imaginary is constituted by the psychological reading and manipulation of opponents. Based on this analysis, it is possible to distil three ideal types for playing poker, each of which is primarily oriented toward one of the three orders of the Lacanian trinity. The three types of players are designated by the terms "Sucker," "Grinder," and "Player." These terms are commonly used among players. In this analysis, they have of course been given a certain meaning and philosophical precision. In brief, the three different approaches to the game are distinguished like this: the Sucker plays the luck, the Grinder plays the cards, and the Player plays the opponent.

It is important to note that the three types are conceived as ideal types in Max Weber's classical definition of the term. The ideal type

> is a conceptual construct (*Gedankenbild*) which is neither historical reality nor even the "true" reality. . . . It has the significance of a purely ideal limiting concept with which the real situation or action is compared and surveyed for the explication of certain of its significant components.[2]

Sucker, Grinder, and Player are thus used as model terms, and actual, empirical poker players constitute only approximations to these ideal types. In practice, a player's way of playing consists in a given composition of the three extrapolated approaches to the game. This means, of course, that the five actually observed classes of poker players in chapter 5 do not correspond directly to the ideal types distilled in this chapter. They constitute approximations to these ideal types. We could also think of the ideal types in the following as three different force fields in the space where the subjectivity of the poker player is constituted.

TO BET OR NOT TO BET ON AN INSIDE STRAIGHT DRAW

> Every Poker player has heard that drawing to an inside Straight is usually a Sucker play. That's generally true at most forms of Poker. But, in Hold'em (especially No-Limit) . . . drawing to an inside Straight can be a sound and justifiable play. It all depends on the situation. If you can

draw to that belly-Straight cheap—and there's the possibility you can win a real big pot by breaking your opponent if you make it . . . then you should gamble and take that 5 to 1 shot. The reward makes the risk worthwhile.[3]

The essence of this, Doyle Brunson's little gem on the philosophy of the inside straight draw,[4] can be summed up by a Shakespearean paraphrase: To bet or not to bet on an inside straight draw: that is the question. We shall be using this question as the pivotal point of our exposition of the three ideal types. Let us imagine the following scenario: The game is No-Limit Hold 'Em with blinds of $1/$2. Our player is in the big blind with **5♠ 4♠.** The opponent raises to $15 from the small blind with **A♥ 7♠.** Our player calls. All other players fold. The pot is at $30 when the flop comes **A♦ 7♦ 2♣,** giving the opponent top two-pair and our player four outs to a straight. Our player checks and the opponent makes a bet of $15. Now our player chooses to call. What does this tell us about our player?

Opponent

Player

According to Brunson: "Drawing to an inside Straight is usually a Sucker play." With only four outs, our player has approximately 9 percent probability of completing his straight on the turn and another 9 percent probability of completing on the river. Thus, calling in the face of these dire odds seems to qualify our player as a Sucker.[5] But why does the Sucker make the sucker play? We have to make a few philosophical steps backward in order to answer this question.

We have seen in part 1 that chance is one of the fundamental dimensions of poker. The engagement with chance in gambling is a very direct engagement with the real, unmediated by the symbolic. Entering into this kind of engagement, the subjectivity of the gambler is challenged in a very peculiar way. The gambler exposes herself to a situation that is outside the regular system of meaningful causality of the symbolic universe.[6] In these situations, there are both a deficit and a surplus of meaning. There is no ra-

tional explanation for *why* chance makes me win or lose in this given situation. And at the same time, the experience of winning or losing by chance is so exhilarating that at that particular moment everything seems to make perfect sense. In fact, this type of engagement with chance may even be conceived as struggle to refute the very existence of chance. Here is how Baudrillard unfolds this point:

> The stake is a summons, the game a duel: chance is summoned to respond, obliged by the player's wager to declare itself either favorable or hostile. Chance is never neutral, the game transforms it into a player and agonistic figure. Which is another way of saying that the basic assumption behind the game is that *chance does not exist*. Chance in its modern, rational sense, chance as an aleatory mechanism, pure probability subjected to the *laws* of probability (and not to the rules of a game)—a sort of Great Neutral Aleatorium (G.N.A.), the epitome of a fluctuating universe dominated by statistical abstractions, a secularized, disenchanted and unbound divinity. This kind of chance does not exist in games; they exist to ward it off. Games of chance deny that the world is arranged contingently, on the contrary they seek to override any such neutral order and recreate a ritual order of obligations which undermines the free world of equivalences.[7]

In the world of gambling in general, and in the world of poker in particular, the concept of "action" is often used to refer to these situations, where players experience a very direct engagement with the real. A player "craving action" is someone being turned on by the sheer unruliness and unpredictability of the game. And a player "giving action" is someone betting high and recklessly, adding risk and excitement to the game.

In Erving Goffman's seminal essay on gambling, he makes the following definition: "Action consists of chancy tasks undertaken for 'their own sake.'" And he continues: "Excitement and character display, the by-products of practical gambles, of serious fateful scenes, become in the case of action the tacit purpose of the whole show."[8] For a poker player, who is in the game for the action, the primary motivation is not the prospect of winning money. This is where many people who are not gamblers themselves err in their (mis)understanding of gambling and gamblers. They interpret gambling within the framework of ordinary economic behavior (which is itself not as rational and calculative as we often like to imagine) and think of it as a kind of profit-oriented investment. For most poker players,

money plays a crucial role in their decision to enter the game, but their basic drive is the sheer excitement of being part of the action. This excitement derives from the engagement with the real. This drive is perhaps most eminently expressed in the words of legendary gambler and poker player Nick "the Greek" Dandalos: "The next best thing to gambling and winning is gambling and losing."[9]

As the gambler's subjectivity is challenged in a peculiar way in the engagement with chance, this engagement is also, as Goffman points out, an opportunity for a particular show of character:

> It is during moments of action that the individual has the risk and opportunity of displaying to himself and sometimes to others his style of conduct when the chips are down. Character is gambled; a single good showing can be taken as representative, and a bad showing cannot be easily excused or reattempted. To display or express character, weak or strong, is to generate character. The self, in brief, can be voluntarily subjected to re-creation. . . . [H]ere is the chance to show grace under pressure; here is the opportunity to be measured by Hemingway's measure of men.[10]

In the philosophical exposition in part 1, we have seen how the real is that which "resists symbolization." The real constitutes a surplus in relation to the symbolic order. Thus, when a gambler engages with the real in a gambling game, it is something other than a test of his social identity. In a situation such as a job interview, a person is tested as to whether he is fit to occupy a particular position in the social order or not. His symbolic mandate is determined. In the gambling situation, a dimension of the gambler's subjectivity beyond the social identity is put to the test. The gambler exposes himself to an order of causality, or perhaps rather *non*-causality, beyond the ordinary regularities of the symbolic order. Thus, something other than the social identity of the gambler is at stake. In Goffman's words, "character is gambled."

In the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, we find an investigation of the concept of character. He writes:

> Motives do not determine the character of man, but only the phenomenon or appearance of that character, that is, the deeds and actions, the external form of the course of his life, not its inner significance and content. These proceed from the character which is the immediate phenomenon of the will, and is therefore groundless. That one man is

wicked and another good does not depend on motives and external influences such as teaching and preaching; and in this sense the thing is absolutely inexplicable.[11]

We can compare Schopenhauer's famous distinction between "will" (*Wille*) and "representation" (*Vorstellung*) to the Lacanian distinction between the real and the symbolic. Character belongs to the domain of will, and the concept points toward something that lies beyond the determination of identity in the symbolic order. Character is not determined by different actions justified with reference to social values and motives. Character, rather, reveals itself in the way a person relates to the entire social system of values and motivations. Character cannot be reduced to the determinations within this system, and it is thus "inexplicable" and "groundless." The gambling game provides an eminent opportunity for the test of the gambler's character. The character of the gambler is revealed in the way he stands up to the utter "groundlessness" of chance.

We should note that the test of character in gambling is not necessarily (concurrent) with the outcome of the gamble. A gambler may lose in the game but demonstrate great character by facing up to the loss with the proper amount of calm and dignity. Or he may win in a way that testifies to a weak character. In regards to the test of character, the question is not so much whether the gambler wins or loses but how he manages to stand up in the game regardless of the outcome.

The element of action and the challenge to character are also why gambling games often draw the attention and excitement of spectators, not directly involved in the game. When people crowd around a high roller at a crap table, or when televised broadcasts from major poker tournaments attract millions of viewers, it is perhaps not primarily because spectators are interested in the outcome of the games but rather because they are curious and intrigued to see how players handle themselves with high stakes on the line. There is something fascinating about watching players handle huge stacks of chips that would in the "normal" world outside of the game translate into years of hard labor, with the same coolness, composure, and seeming disregard they would move little plastic disks.

The point of these considerations on action and character is that the dimension of the real in poker, as well as in other gambling games, constitutes an element that appeals to something other than the simple desire to win. This is why we see in poker and other gambling games actions that would be, from a purely calculative and strategic point of view, irrational or

downright incomprehensible. One can interpret these actions as the outcome of stupidity and ignorance. And sometimes indeed they are. However, even when a certain amount of stupidity and ignorance is involved, these seemingly irrational acts often have a purpose of their own. The decision to make a certain move in a game of poker, or the decision to sit down in the game at all, cannot be reduced to a mere strategic and calculative decision. It is also always a decision just to be involved, to be "where the action is." Taking a chance in a gambling game, whether strategically optimal or not, is also taking the opportunity to test and display character. This is the seductive charm of gambling and often the primary reward for gamblers who participate in a game.

In gambling games of pure chance such as roulette, blackjack, or slots, a player is typically involved in every round of the game for the entire duration of his gambling session. The player is thus continuously exposed to action. The course and the rhythm of a game of poker are different from these games, as players constantly have to decide whether they are "in" or "out," whether they want to "hold 'em" or "fold 'em." One of the crucial qualities of a successful poker player is thus the ability to say no to action. Since you cannot win on every hand, it is all-important to get involved only in hands where you have a reasonable chance of winning. Thus, good poker playing involves a lot of waiting; waiting for the right hand and the right opportunities in the game to occur. Furthermore, even when a player does get involved in a pot with a strong hand, he should always be prepared to fold the hand again, if suddenly the development of the cards turns the odds against him. Even though, in principle, this is very simple to do, it is in practice one of the most difficult things to do. Patience and the ability to make huge laydowns, that is, fold a large pot, are primary virtues of successful poker players.

So the reason our player chooses to call the opponent's bet with an inside straight draw might be the simple one that he is primarily in the game for the action and lacks the patience and discipline to say no to action. If this is the case, he surely falls into the category of the Sucker. As the pot has grown to a considerable size, the level of "action" in the game has risen, and he is unable to release his hand, even though folding is strategically the right move.

As an ideal type, the Sucker is a loose-passive player. He wants to be involved in as many pots as possible, as he wants to be constantly "where the action is." This makes him a loose player. Furthermore, once he is in a pot, he will not fold the hand but rather cling to the chance that the deal of the

cards will go his way, however small these chances may be. In other words, he is appealing to luck to win his hands for him. In this sense, the Sucker is oriented toward the dimension of the real in his approach to the game. This approach to the game is captured by Martinez and LaFranchi:

> The consistent loser thinks he might win, if he gets the right luck. His perception of the statistical probabilities of holding winning cards is distorted by his great desire to win and his heavy reliance upon luck, rather than upon skill. The meaning of luck to the loser is twofold. On the one hand, he believes luck is what makes one player a winner and another a loser. With such a view, the loser can save face even as he loses, for his fate is out of his control: "lady luck did it." On the other hand, he wants to regard himself as having the ability to play well and, of course, to win consistently. When he does win, he wants to define it as a victory of his personal skill over luck.[12]

The class of players identified in the empirical analysis in chapter 5 coming closest to this ideal type is of course class 1, which we have designated as the Novice. We were expecting this class of players to be generally looser than other players, but this hypothesis was not confirmed. In this respect, the empirical class deviates somewhat from the ideal type. However, the characteristic feature of this class of players is a very passive style of playing both pre- and postflop. This means that this class of players is neither able to play hands strategically by betting aggressively nor able to fold hands when they are statistically behind. Instead, they seem to hold on to their hands by calling rather than betting or folding. This class of players stay on for the action. General poker theory, as well as the results of our analysis, suggests that this is not a very profitable approach to the game. Since there is indeed an element of chance in poker, the Novice is going to win a number of hands because of occasional luck. However, if he is up against better players, he is most probably going to win very little money on the hands he is winning and lose a lot of money on the hands he is losing, the net result amounting to a substantial loss. He may have fun playing, but he is likely to lose his money in the long run.

Class 2 in the latent class analysis is designated as the Leisure player. This class of player also lies within the sphere of the ideal type of the Sucker. The Leisure player is slightly more skilled than the Novice of class 1, and her results in terms of wins and losses are also slightly better. But still, the Leisure player is characterized by a passive style of playing with a high frequency of calls compared to folds and raises.

When pursuing his luck, always hoping the next card will turn things around and save him, the Sucker is playing poker in the order of the real. The Sucker addresses the real in a very immediate form. In this approach to the game, there is a certain quasi-metaphysical dimension at play. This is captured by Reith:

> In playing . . . gamblers are doing more than simply engaging in a game, but are, in a sense, questioning their destiny. The query "will I win?" takes on metaphysical significance, far transcending the outcome of the game and amounting to the gamblers' questioning of their very existence. . . . [F]or the player who asks "am I lucky?" the answer seems somehow to promise a solution to the whole problem of his personal relation to the supernatural powers that govern the universe. The luck conceived as the personal possession of power or *mana* here takes on religious significance as a sign of external favour. Gamblers want simply to *know* their status. . . . To find out their status, gamblers must simply *play*, and to this end, their formal structure of a gamble creates an arena for a ritualised dialogue with fate.[13]

The Sucker's inability to "say no to action," that is, to fold an inside straight draw, perhaps derives from this need to "know his status." He wants to know, if luck is on his side, and the only way to know this is indeed to challenge fate by playing.

GRINDING OUT A PROFIT

The game scenario of the inside straight draw lends itself to the following statistical analysis: At the time, when our player is confronted with the decision of whether to call with his inside straight draw, the pot is $45. Obviously, he needs to fill his straight to have any hopes of winning the pot at showdown. The probability of filling the straight on the turn is approximately 9 percent and another 9 percent on the river card. To stay in the pot, he needs to pay at least $15. If we look at the current round of betting in isolation, he is offered a possible 3:1 return on an 11:1 proposition. Based on this simple mathematical analysis, this is not a profitable call, and the player should fold his inside straight draw.

Our second ideal type is the Grinder, and this kind of mathematical reasoning is characteristic of the Grinder's approach. In other words, the Grinder would never have bet on the inside straight draw. To the Grinder, poker is in no way a game of luck but a game of statistical calculation and

deductive logic. The Grinder does not pursue chancy draws but rather relies on the Law of Great Numbers to provide him with an edge in the long run. This allows him to "grind out" a profit through consistent playing. He relies on probability theory in order to neutralize the chance element of poker. He exercises what Hacking terms *taming of chance*.[14] The Grinder knows that luck is randomly distributed, which is almost the same as saying there is no such thing as luck. Instead of waiting for luck to help him in any situation, the Grinder seizes the moment when he gets a good hand and makes the most money of the particular situation, while at the same time trying to reduce his losses when he has a bad hand.

At any point in the game, the Grinder will calculate the strength of his hand based on its current value and its probability of improving with more cards to come compared to the estimated current and potential strength of the hands of other players in the pot. The philosophy of the Grinder is spelled out in Sklansky's *Fundamental Theorem of Poker:*

> Every time you play a hand differently from the way you would have played it if you could see all your opponents' cards, they gain; and every time you play your hand the same way you would have played it if you could see all their cards, they lose. Conversely, every time opponents play their hands differently from the way they would have if they could see all your cards, you gain; and every time they play their hands the same way they would have played if they could see all your cards, you lose.[15]

The theorem implies that betting action should be based on statistical evaluations of the expected value of one's own hand and deductive assessments of the opponents' hand values. The edge of the Grinder lies in his ability to assess the current value of his hand more accurately than his opponents and make the optimal bet on this basis.

The Grinder operates in the order of the symbolic. He exchanges cards for money at the optimal price, that is, his estimation of the value of his hand is a form of symbolization. Contrary to the Sucker, the Grinder's symbolization of his hand works on the premises of the symbolic order by being based on deductive logic and probability theory. When the Sucker decides when to bet or fold, he is relying on forces outside of the symbolic order, that is, on luck. Luck belongs to the order of the real. While the Sucker is playing his luck, the Grinder is playing the cards.

In the philosophical analyses of part 2, we saw how the real emerges in the gaps and cracks of the symbolic order. The Sucker thrives on these

gaps, and he rejoices in challenging fate by throwing himself into these holes of utter groundlessness. Contrary to the Sucker's approach, the goal of the Grinder is to minimize and preferably close these gaps in the symbolic order entirely. This approach is further exemplified by Sklansky:

> The art of poker is filling the gaps in the incomplete information provided by your opponent's betting and the exposed cards in open-handed games, and at the same time preventing your opponents from discovering any more than what you want them to know about your hand.[16]

The ideal is to make decisions based entirely on mathematical and logical reasoning of the symbolic order. In Sklansky's Fundamental Theorem of Poker we encounter the imaginary view point of an all-knowing player: "If you could see all your opponent's cards . . ." In Lacanian terms, this is the viewpoint of the big Other. From this point of view, there is indeed a right and a wrong way to play a hand, and the ideal of the Grinder is to approximate this play. The ideal of the Grinder is to conform to the law of the big Other. Contrary to this, we see that the Sucker insists on viewing the game from his own particular viewpoint, exemplified by Dostoyevsky's: "True, out of a hundred persons, only one can win; yet what business is that of yours or of mine?"[17]

In chapter 3, we saw how the statistical approach to poker is structured by "the Fantasy of the Long Run." This form of structuring applies most eminently to the Grinder. In his strictly mathematical approach to the game, he insists on viewing the game from an imaginary future viewpoint, that is, from the viewpoint of the long run. In the long run, chance events are evened out and the law of averages kicks in. The long run thus functions as an imaginary point where the symbolic order is complete. The effects of the unruly real have been neutralized, chance is fully "tamed," and the universe is subordinated to the symbolic regularity and calculability of probability theory. The long run comes to function as a kind of day of judgment, where it is finally and justly determined who is the best player, that is, who has achieved the highest degree of conformity to the Law. This fantasy structures the desire of the Grinder. His behavior is directed toward a kind of salvation in the long run through obedience to the laws of probability and mathematics.

The Grinder's approach to poker is comparable to the notion of morality that we find in Kant's philosophy. According to Kant, morality consists in the subordination of the will to the transcendental principles of reason that are a priori present in the subject. This leads to the formulation of the

famous categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."[18] In Kant, the moral subject insists on viewing the world from the imaginary viewpoint of the universal law, that is, the justification of his current act depends on whether its normative content can be universalized beyond the present time and space and beyond the context of the individual subject. The imperative implies also a renunciation of those inclinations and interests which are particular to the individual subject. Kant speaks of the empirical as opposed to the transcendental dimensions of subjectivity.

The Grinder's approach to poker can be summed up by a similar imperative: "Play only according to that calculus whereby your actions are optimally profitable in the long run." If a bet is not justified by its statistically expected value, it should not be made. And just as the Kantian moral subject should renounce his empirical inclinations and interests, the Grinder should resist the temptation to gamble on unprofitable propositions, just to be part of "the action." The Grinder should be able to "say no to action" and specifically in the game scenario of the inside straight draw, he should definitely fold.

DESIRE AND DRIVE

With regards to the Grinder's desire there is a paradox in the relation between desire and law. As we have already touched upon, there is inscribed in the laws of probability theory an impossibility of the complete fulfillment of these laws. The law of averages may be fulfilled in the long run, but the long run is never now. The long run is always postponed into the future, thus preventing full satisfaction of the desire for mathematical completeness promised by the long run. Desire is thus maintained in a constant state of partial satisfaction. When the Grinder takes up the viewpoint of the long run by applying the laws of probability theory, often he will have to accept the fact that the world does not in the short run behave according to these laws. He will have to endure the basic condition of play: "In the long run there's no luck in poker, but the short run is longer than most people know."[19]

Inherent in the symbolic order of mathematics and probability theory is a fundamental lack. This lack is constituted by the single instance, the card to be dealt on the next round. The single instance is never fully mastered by probability theory. We may be able to calculate the precise probability of hitting a trey on the turn, but however minuscule its likelihood, we can never fully rule out its occurrence. In this way, the single instance

constitutes a little piece of the real that resists symbolization. In relation to the Grinder's desire, the single instance corresponds to the Lacanian concept of *objet petit a*. Basically, the Grinder's desire for mathematical completeness is a desire for control over stochastic events. However, the single instance constantly eludes control, and this elusion is precisely what sustains the desire of the Grinder through constant insatisfaction. In Žižek's definition: "*objet petit a* [is] a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire."[20] The relation between the subject and *object petit a* is further elaborated:

> The subject . . . and the object-cause of its desire . . . are strictly correlative. There is a subject only in so far as there is some material stain/leftover that *resists* subjectivation, a surplus in which, precisely, the subject *cannot* recognize itself. In other words, the paradox of the subject is that it exists only through its own radical impossibility, through a "bone in the throat" that forever prevents it (the subject) from achieving its full ontological identity.[21]

Paradoxically, the subjectivity of the Grinder is suspended in an impossible desire for the appropriation of the single instance in the same way that the condition of possibility for probability theory to exert its predictive powers over an empirical field is that events in this field are indeed random and thus by definition unpredictable.

Following Lacan's reading of "Kant avec Sade,"[22] Žižek points out that complete renunciation of empirical inclinations through obedience to the Law does not necessarily imply renunciation of all kinds of enjoyment and pleasure. On the contrary, the act of submitting unconditionally to the commands of Law may give rise to a certain "surplus-enjoyment."[23] This is the kind of enjoyment we find, for instance, in asceticist practices where the renunciation of all worldly pleasures in the name of some religious or political doctrine can be in itself the source of great pleasure.

In this light, it is interesting to note that the Grinder's "no to action" may also be connected with some form of surplus-enjoyment. Again, we shall be reading Sklansky as an eminent exponent of the Grinder's approach to poker. He writes:

> Another important reason to understand [mathematical] expectation is that it gives you a sense of equanimity towards winning or losing a bet: When you make a good bet or a good fold, you will know that you have earned or saved a specific amount which a lesser player would not have earned or saved. It is much harder to make that fold if you are upset because your hand was outdrawn. However, the money you save by fold-

ing instead of calling adds to your winnings for the night or for the month. *I actually derive pleasure from making a good fold even though I have lost the pot.*[24]

This is a illustrative example of how the Grinder insists on viewing the game from the viewpoint of the long run. The point here is not whether the individual pot is won or lost. The Grinder's mind should be unaffected by such singular events. What counts is whether the Grinder's play is mathematically correct and that this correctness be rewarded on an aggregate level, that is, over the course of "the night" or "the month." Sklansky even urges that "you should . . . derive satisfaction from a losing session when you know that other players would have lost much more with your cards."[25] The Grinder's pleasure and satisfaction here are akin to those of a Christian believer whose desire is structured by the fantasy of salvation in the hereafter. Viewing the game from the imaginary point of the long run should engender, in the Grinder, equanimity to withstand emotionally the fluctuations and inevitable "bad beats" caused by the natural variance in the game. In parallel fashion, belief in God and confidence that righteousness shall prevail in the hereafter may inspire, in the Christian, strength to endure the meaninglessness, suffering, and injustice of worldly life.

Obviously, the structuring of the Grinder's desire is very different from that of the Sucker. The difference between the two approaches corresponds to the Lacanian distinction between *desire* and *drive*. Here is how Žižek describes the move from desire to drive: "Once we move beyond desire—that is to say, beyond the fantasy which sustains desire—we enter the strange domain of *drive:* the domain of the closed circular palpitation that finds satisfaction in endlessly repeating the same failed gesture."[26] The Grinder's approach to poker is thoroughly governed by the fantasy of the long run. This fantasy functions, as we have seen, to structure his desire. In the case of the Sucker, something entirely different is at play. The Sucker's untamed craving for action and his immediate engagement with the real constitute an utter disregard for the fantasy of the long run. The Sucker has no anticipation of a future reward. He might indeed hope for a win, but it is doubtful whether this hope is the actual motor of his play. Ideal-typically, the purpose of the Sucker's play is neither the anticipation of a win nor the achievement of mathematically optimal play. The purpose of the Sucker's play is playing itself.

With the disregard of the fantasy of the long run the structuring principle of desire is eroded. Desire is characterized by a distance between the act and the purpose of the act. The act is directed at an object outside of the

act. In the approach of the Sucker, the purpose of the act and the act itself have collapsed into each other. The Sucker has moved beyond desire and entered the strange domain of drive. This is why it is sometimes difficult to understand people who keep gambling despite continuous losses. We try to understand gambling within the framework of an ordinary desire for money. We look for a desire behind the act of gambling, but in fact, there is no desire. There is only the unstructured, unfocused, self-propelling drive to gamble.

Žižek also applies the distinction between goal and aim to further unfold the distinction between desire and drive:

> The goal is the final destination, while the aim is what we intend to do, i.e., the way itself. . . . [T]he real purpose of the drive is not its goal (full satisfaction) but its aim: the drive's ultimate aim is simply to reproduce itself as drive, to return to its circular path, to continue its path to and from the goal. The real source of enjoyment is the repetitive movement of this closed circuit.[27]

The Grinder's approach is goal oriented, whether the goal is accumulation of money, approximation to a mathematical ideal, or both. The Sucker has no goal. He has an aim, and this aim is gambling itself.

Classes 3 and 4 in the latent class analysis, designated as ABC player and Serious player, are the types closest to the ideal type of the Grinder. Obviously, there is a great deal of speculation involved in the suggestion that the structuring of the subjectivity of players within these categories corresponds to the ideal type of the Grinder. Once again, we should remember the difference between ideal types and actual empirical players. The reason for designating these classes of players as Grinders is, nevertheless, that their style of playing seems to approximate mathematically optimal ABC poker. Their strategy is to stick to "correct" play and then make a profit in the long run as luck is evened out and other players are punished for their "mistakes." We see also that classes 3 and 4 have a higher frequency of play than classes 1 and 2, which also suggests that their playing style is geared toward the long run rather than a quick lucky punch.

HEART, ALLIGATOR BLOOD, AND INTESTINAL FORTITUDE

The game scenario we have been looking at in this chapter is in fact not entirely fictitious. In the 1980 World Series of Poker, two players were heads up at the final table.[28] Doyle Brunson, with $232,500 in chips, raises before

the flop with **A♥ 7♠.** Stu Ungar, with $497,500 in chips, calls with **5♠ 4♠.** The pot is at $30,000 when the flop comes **A♦ 7♦ 2♣,** giving Brunson top two-pair and Ungar four outs to a straight. Ungar checks, and Brunson makes a bet of $17,000. From a mathematical point of view, the situation is now roughly similar to the one described in our scenario. Ungar has to decide whether to stay in the pot with his inside straight draw.

In the actual situation, Ungar decides to call. The turn brings the **3♥.** Having completed his straight, Ungar bets $40,000. Brunson moves all-in with his two pairs. The river brings the **2♦** and does not help Brunson. Ungar wins the hand as well as the championship.

So does Ungar's call on the flop make him a Sucker? Since Ungar went on to win the 1981 and 1997 World Championships and a number of other major titles and since he is sometimes referred to as the greatest poker player of all time,[29] this categorization hardly seems reasonable. When Ungar decides to call, he is taking into account not only the odds of completing his straight and the money already in the pot. The call is justified by the assumption that if he does catch one of the four treys left in the deck, he can persuade Brunson to bet the rest of his stack.

It could be argued that this kind of reasoning is merely a standard calculation of implied pot odds, which is part of the standard repertoire of any moderately skilled poker player.[30] The odds of Ungar making the straight on the turn are indeed only 11:1, but the prospect of Brunson contributing the remaining part of his chips offers him a possible 15:1 return, thus justifying the call.

As we have already discussed in chapter 3, this kind of mathematical reasoning is, however, based on a number of assumptions that go beyond mere mathematical analysis. When Ungar reasons that Brunson is likely to go all-in, this is based not only on a reading of Brunson's general style of playing but also on a reading of Brunson's reading of Ungar himself. Ungar is probably well aware that he has an image of being a very loose and

aggressive player, an image earned through his play over the course of several hands and sessions. Thus, when Ungar makes the $40,000 bet on the turn, Brunson does not read Ungar as necessarily having a strong hand and moves all-in with his two pairs. The hand is won by Ungar, not through closer approximation to the laws of probability theory, but through superior reading and manipulation of the imaginary order of the game. Ungar is taking advantage of a discrepancy between his own imaginary order and Brunson' imaginary order and he is able to include Brunson's reading of the game in his own reading.

The boundary between mathematical symbolization of the real and mastery of the imaginary dimension of the game is indeed hazy, and the boundary constantly moves as poker theory and poker software become more and more advanced and the general level of skill in the game is heightened. As we have seen in chapter 3, it is in the nature of poker that there is always going to be such a boundary. There is a point in the game where reading skills and control of the fantasies and emotions of yourself and the opponent take over from theory and mathematical calculation. Somewhere beyond this point, we find the Player.

Here is how poker author Rick Bennet elaborates this point:

> *Good* poker is hard work. Technical skills, you might say. Learning the odds, remembering exposed cards, having the discipline to fold, maintaining attentiveness to your opponent's appearance.
> *Great* poker is courage. Technical skills will get you through most poker situations because most poker situations don't give rise to your emotions. But the big decisions do. By definition, you might even say. You certainly want to keep your emotions down, but if they do come up, as they will at key moments, you have to deal with them.[31]

We have seen how the Grinder seeks to optimize his game by minimizing the gaps in the symbolic order. He seeks to achieve the highest degree of mathematical and logical mastery of the game. In contrast, the Player's approach is characterized by a constant awareness of the insufficiency of mathematical and logical calculation. In Lacanian terms, this awareness translates into the knowledge that there is "no Other of the [big] Other."[32] The Player knows that there is no gold standard in a poker game.

In the latent class analysis, class 5, the Professional, is the type closest to the ideal type of the Player. This class of players is characterized by aggression. To be aggressive is to take charge of the course of the game. Instead of *re*-acting to the opponents' moves by calling, the aggressive player

takes the initiative and acts himself by betting, or folding when he knows he's beat. If an aggressive player senses hesitation or weakness in an opponent, he will force the opponent out of the pot by betting hard even if he does not have a strong hand. If he senses strength and resolve in the opponent, he will fold his hand before it costs him too much money. However, to make such an aggressive style work successfully requires great reading skills. This is the characteristic of the Player.

The Grinder's approximation to the big Other of mathematical calculation is in a sense equivalent to an annihilation of the subjective element of his play. The Grinder does not want his game to be affected by irrational ideas or emotions. In Kant, such ideas and emotions are referred to as empirical inclinations. Instead, he tries to act as a mere medium for the execution of the rules of the big Other. The Player knows that subjectivity is an inevitable part of poker, whether you want it to be so or not. Instead of trying to minimize the subjective part of the game, the Player seeks to master and exploit this dimension. We have referred to this as "traversing the fantasy." It means taking into account that any symbolization of the real in the form of mathematical calculation or logical deduction is structured around a central lack and then recognizing the way people compensate for this lack through their imaginary fantasies.

In the section on the Sucker, we investigated the role of character in gambling. Gambling games involve interaction with dimensions of the gambler's subjectivity that are beyond his symbolic identity. They test his character. This is also true of poker. Therefore, in order to go beyond a certain level in the reading of an opponent, you must have a sense of the opponent's character. Poker author Al Alvarez writes. "It is not enough to study the betting patterns of the other people at the table; you must also analyze their characters—separate the fox from the buffalo, the tortoise from the hare, the rock from the snake beneath it."[33] Perhaps we can say that a person's character consists of his fundamental fantasies and so the reading of character is a reading of fantasies. As the Player's edge in the game is constituted by his superior skills in reading opponents' characters and fantasies, we can say that while the Sucker is playing his luck, the Grinder is playing the cards, the Player is playing the opponent.

The hardest part of mastering this dimension of the game, perhaps, regards not the fantasies of opponents but rather the fantasies of the Player himself. As we have seen in the previous chapter, successful poker playing beyond a certain level requires great self-management skills. In the Player's approach to poker, the ambition is not to eliminate the fantasmatic dimen-

sion but rather to utilize this dimension in a productive fashion. Poker legend Puggy Pearson is quoted saying: "The first thing a gambler has to do is make friends with himself. . . . A lot of people go through the world thinking they're someone else. There are a lot of players sitting at this table with mistaken identities." And Alvarez continues: "Making friends with yourself means being able to recognize your own weaknesses—impulsiveness, impatience, greed, fear. But the greatest enemy of all is ego."[34]

In Žižek's theory of subjectivity, identity and alienation are two sides of the same coin. The subject is not, as some social constructivists like to think, the sum of all its symbolic identifications produced in society. Rather, the subject experiences itself precisely when these symbolic identifications appear to be slightly missing the point. The subject may indeed identify with the symbolic mandates ascribed to him: male, Danish citizen, car owner, sociologist, middle class,and so on, but his sense of being a self emerges only when these designations "do not quite account for what I am" and the feeling arises that "I am more than that." As we elaborated in chapter 3, we see here the incongruity between the real and the symbolic at play at the level of subjectivity. Subjectivity is neither the presymbolic real person nor the product of the symbolization, but the gap separating the two.

In this theory of the subject, ego operates in the register of the imaginary. The ego is the way the subject manages the gap between the real of acts and emotions and their identifications in the order of the symbolic. We have already seen that the imaginary is structured in fantasmatic forms; or perhaps rather that the imaginary functions by structuring through fantasy. In this sense, the subject's notion of self is basically a fantasy. It is the fantasy that all emotions and acts originate from a basic kernel of the self. Paradoxically, this kernel is simultaneously nothing and something. The kernel is nothing insofar as it emerges only as a lack in the symbolic identification of the subject, and it is something insofar as this lack creates a space into which fantasy projects the image of the self. Even though this image is fantasmatic, it has actual effects because it functions as structuring principle for the subject.

If we allow ourselves a Lacanian reading of Pearson and Alvarez, the notion of "making friends with yourself" means that the ego comes to terms with the impossibility of fixating the self symbolically and with the fantasmatic character of self-image. Lacan states that "the madman is not only a beggar who thinks he is king, but also a king who thinks he is a king."[35] Madness here is defined by the absolute identification with the

symbolic mandate "king." The "mad" king believes he is king on account of his natural properties and he believes the symbolic mandate is just the natural extension of these properties. He fails to recognize that he is king only because his subjects treat him as such and that his image of himself as king is basically fantasmatic.

This is the kind of ego Alvarez is warning against—an ego believing that whenever he wins in poker, it is the direct cause of his natural properties as a poker player. And an ego believing that he is able to shut out all unwanted emotions from his poker playing. "Making friends with yourself" is the recognition that fantasy and emotion are intrinsic parts of all poker play. Instead of trying to eliminate, ignore, or avoid these elements by becoming a pure medium of the law of the big Other, the Player utilizes them in a productive fashion. And in order to do so, the Player has to recognize and accept their existence as part of his character, even when they take the shape of weaknesses such as "impulsiveness, impatience, greed, fear." Poker legend Bobby Baldwin makes a crucial point along similar lines:

> The need to take chances, even reckless chances, is an inherent characteristic of every successful gambler I've known. The difference between these winners and the would-be stars who bash themselves and their bankrolls into oblivion is this: *Winners have stopped denying that these dangerous urges exist within them. They have come to terms with themselves.*[36]

With regards to the distinction between desire and drive, this means that the Player recognizes that his desire to play optimally and win is always "stained" with the sheer drive to gamble, the craving for action. The Player should come to terms with his "inner Sucker." The challenge here is to traverse the fantasy of the long run and realize the impossibility of the desire it sustains without regressing into pure, unstrategic gambling propelled by drive. This corresponds to the challenge of Lacanian psychoanalysis: "after we have traversed the fantasy, and accepted the 'nonexistence of the big Other,' how do we none the less return to some (new) form of the big Other that again makes collective coexistence possible?"[37] The answer to this challenge is formulated thus:

> We may denote the ethics implied by Lacanian psychoanalysis as that of *separation*. The famous Lacanian motto not to give way on one's desire [*ne pas céder sur son desir*]—is aimed at the fact that we must not obliterate the distance separating the Real from its symbolization: it is this surplus of the Real over every symbolization that functions as the object-

cause of desire. To come to terms with this surplus (or, more precisely, leftover) means to acknowledge a fundamental deadlock ("antagonism"), a kernel resisting symbolic integration-dissolution.[38]

The desire to play correctly and to win is not enough to excel beyond a certain level in poker. To stay focused for the amount of hours and even days it takes to win a major tournament and to keep yourself motivated for the amount of months and years it takes to learn the craft and art of poker playing, you must also be fueled by the simple drive to gamble. Furthermore, the courage to break with the norms of standard play in key situations is conditioned by a willingness to let the sheer craving for action intervene and traverse a rational and mathematically justified strategy. The capacity to navigate in this border zone between rationality and irrationality, professional poker play and compulsive gambling, desire and drive, and the ability to keep composure under pressure while still being in touch with the fundamental enjoyment of gambling are what characterize the Player.

These characteristics are sometimes referred by words such as "heart," "alligator blood," and "intestinal fortitude."[39] It is worth noting how these words all refer to parts of the Player's body. Of course the terms should not be taken literally, but perhaps there is a crucial point in this reference to the bodily real. It suggests that even though poker is basically a symbolic mind game, where players compete by outthinking each other, the difference between good poker players and great poker players emanates from some real (bodily) source outside of the mind.

SUBJECTIVITY AND SKILLS

The distinction between Sucker, Grinder, and Player provides a theoretical framework for reviewing and qualifying the analysis of professional poker players and skills in the previous chapter.

The primary difference between the Sucker on the one hand and the Grinder and the Player on the other lies in the mastery of the basic technical and strategic skills of poker. The Sucker does not possess the skills needed to discriminate between profitable propositions and unprofitable propositions, that is, between "action worth getting involved in" and "action to say no to." As a player gradually acquires the basic calculative and strategic skills of poker, he will be moving from the position of the Sucker toward the position of the Grinder. Acquisition of other metagame skills such as game selection, tilt control, and so on will have the function of re-

taining the player in the position of the Grinder and prevent him from re-gressing into occasional sucker-plays.

It is within the nature of the game that no professional poker players are Suckers. Success in poker comes from removing oneself as far as possible from the ideal type of the Sucker. However, there seem to be within the category of players successful enough to qualify for the designation "pro-fessional" different schools of players, some closer to the ideal type of the Grinder, some closer to the ideal type of the Player.

If we first look at the very motivation for playing poker, we can compare two statements from two professional players. The first is an online pro-fessional in his midtwenties, who plays shorthand in $1–$2, $2–$4, and oc-casionally $3–$6 online cash games. The latter is a seasoned professional 10 years older who is an all-round player but prefers heads-up and plays in games as high as $50–$100.

OB: What is your ambition in poker?

IP: I hope to advance and make more money. I would like to make good money playing poker. I also like the opportunities that if you get better, you are rewarded. The reward is better than if you have a job. In a job you may expect that if you work hard for a while, maybe you can make 2,000 crowns extra per month in a year or two. The reward in poker is much better than that. Here you can make 10,000, 20,000, or 30,000 more per month. You can compare it to being a business entrepreneur. If you do a really good job, it means more money.

IP: It is not just a job and it is not just for the money. I also want to be the best. To me it is very prestigious to be the best poker player. It is a sport like golf, football, etc. I struggle all the time to improve myself and become better and better. You are drawn by the game, but for me I was also driven by wanting to be the best. I wanted to be so good that I was the best. That was my primary motivation. I wanted to prove definitely to my opponent that I was better than he was. I like the extreme intensity and the fight against a single or two players. I like to play heads-up, one-on-one, and I like it when you are constantly focused on the opponent.

In the case of the first interview person, the primary motivation for playing poker is the accumulation of money. This is both the measure and the ob-jective of his success. He compares poker to a job, and his frame of refer-ence is the world of business. Later in the interview, he explains how he

plans to retire from poker in a number of years with enough money to start up a company.

In the case of the latter interviewee, poker is conceived as a competitive fight. The primary objective is victory itself. This also explains his preference for heads-up poker, where the outcome of the game is often a more clear-cut decision of a winner and a loser than in games with several players. Indeed, money is also an important part of the game, but the primary motor for this player is the competitive element itself. Not surprisingly, the frame of reference for this player is the world of sports.

These two different kinds of motivations for playing poker constitute the outer poles in the spectrum of professional players that have been interviewed in this investigation. Furthermore, the first and the latter kind of motivation seem to correspond respectively to the Grinder's approach to the game and the Player's approach to the game.

We have seen how the rationality of table selection prescribes that players only seek out games in which they figure to have an edge against weaker players. However, if a player's motivation for playing poker is to prove himself to be the best, there is only limited satisfaction in playing against weak opponents, who constitute no real challenge. If he thrives on competition, he will seek out opponents at his own level of skill or perhaps even beyond. We have already seen that one of the interview persons was seeking out the very best in the game when he started his career in order to prove his skills. Several of the interview persons tell similar stories. During an interview, one interview person showed a game he was following ("railing") online. The game was a four-table heads-up match[40] with blinds of $500/$1,000 between Tom "Durrrr" Dwan, by many considered to be the best heads-up player in the world, and "Matronas," an upcoming Swedish challenger. Given that both are absolutely world-class players, neither could be sure to have a significant edge over the other. The purpose of the match was therefore a pure test of strength.

A similar phenomenon is known as "limit rushing." Limit rushing designates a situation where a player advances to higher levels because he is on a "rush," that is, he has been winning heavily over a period of time, without having the sufficient bankroll to justify his advancement.

Limit rushing and the selection of games with equal or even stronger opponents obviously go against sound poker strategy such as game selection and bankroll management. Nevertheless, several interviewees describe how they have improved their skills considerably precisely during those periods of their careers when they sought out opposition that would

push them to the limit of their abilities. It seems that in order for a player to improve beyond a certain level of the game, he has to let go of the strict rules of game selection and bankroll management inherent in the Grinder's approach.

We see here that there is a tension between the Grinder's approach and the Player's approach. This is a tension between accumulating money with as little variance as possible and pushing yourself and your skills to the limit. We may identify this tension as a difference in approach between different players, but it is also a tension found within the game and the career of the individual player. This was demonstrated in the previous chapter in the accounts of interview persons explaining how their approach had changed over the course of their careers.

Finally, there seems to be also a tendency for the difference between Grinders and Players to manifest itself on the level of technical skills and reading skills. Although further research is probably needed to confirm the hypothesis, there seems to be among the interview persons a tendency for players with the approach of the Grinder to rely heavily on PokerTracker or similar programs, whereas players that are closer to the ideal type of the Player possess a more intuitive sense of the game and the other players in the game. This allows them to push their game beyond the limits of mathematical rationality.

In figure 7, we find an overview of the three ideal types of players and a brief summary of the characteristics of each of the different approaches. The figure depicts a Möbius band. This is to suggest that the three different approaches may also constitute different stages in the education and career of a poker player. Progressing from one type to another, the player travels along the band. The move from being the Sucker, with little or no skills and with only the drive to gamble, to becoming a Grinder is made through the learning of the basic calculative skills of the game. Furthermore, in order to make the move a player must cultivate qualities such as patience and discipline. In this process, his immediate drive to gamble is transformed into a desire to play optimally and win in the long run.

At some stage, basic calculative and logical skills must be supplemented by more creative skills and the sense of when to break with the standards of ABC poker, if the player is to progress from being a Grinder to being a Player. The figure of the Möbius band illustrates that the difference between calculative skills and creativity is gradual and not clearly demarcated. Sometimes creativity is just the sublimation of calculation and logical de-

Poker as business
Plays the Cards
Fantasy of the Long Run
Desire
Mathematics and Logic - Software
Patience and Discipline
'No' to Action

Grinder

Calculation

Creativity

Gambling

Player

Poker as Sport
Plays the Man
Traversing the Fantasy
Desire stained by Drive
Reading Skills - Intuition
Alligator Blood
Self-Management

Sucker

Poker as existential game
Plays the Luck
Answer of the Real
Drive
No strategy
Test of Character
Craving for Action

Fig. 7. Map of ideal types

duction, and sometimes creativity is a radical break with them. The transition from Grinder to Player is also a transition at the level of desire. The Player opens up to the sheer drive to gamble. Drive becomes an additional source of motivation and concentration, and it feeds the courage to make unusual "moves" in key situations of the game. The subjective challenge of the Player is not to exclude the drive from his subjectivity but rather to manage the balance between desire and drive.

In the figure we find also a gradual transition from being a Player to being a Sucker. As a player moves beyond the standards of ABC poker, it becomes gradually more and more difficult to tell the difference between a genius move and a reckless move, between creativity and gambling. The Player thus operates in a "zone of indistinction." We have seen that the approach of the Player is always to push the limits of his game, whether in terms of choosing strong opponents, limit rushing, inventing new moves on the edge of mathematical rationality, or letting the sheer drive to gamble mix with the desire to play optimally. If a player is not able to navigate

in this zone of indistinction, he will regress to the position of the Sucker. At the level of subjectivity, the same kind of indistinction applies to the relation between desire and drive. In this zone of indistinction, there is a fine line between dedicated professional playing and compulsive gambling. In the words of one interview person: "There is a limit, where you are close to being a compulsive gambler, but where you are able to manage it."

In a society such as ours, where responsibility and choice are exalted, where capital accumulation is a duty and cash a sacred cow, what could be more subversive than the readiness to reduce money to mere counters in a game? The gambler's willingness to throw it all away with merely a shrug of the shoulders could embody a challenge, implicit but powerful, to the modern utopian fantasy of the systematically productive life. The idea that loss is not only inescapable but perhaps even liberating does not sit well with our success mythology, which assumes at least implicitly that "winning is the only thing."[1]

As we have seen in the previous chapter, poker is largely a game of self-management. This means that the risk of engaging in poker is not only a risk of losing money. The risk of losing yourself is also a part of poker. A player's loss of himself is at the same time a tragic and unintended consequence of the game, but the possibility of this loss is also part of the very power of fascination of the game. In this chapter, we shall be exploring different ways in which players may lose themselves in poker. The investigation revolves around the phenomenon of problem gambling.

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE AND DEFINITION

Problem gambling is by now well established as a field of research. There are a number of different scientific approaches to the study of problem gambling. In a thorough review, Blaszczynski Nower lists the following

popular models of problem gambling: addictive, psychodynamic, psychobiological, behavioral, cognitive, and sociological.[2] In a more recent review, Toneatto and Millar add biological models, looking into genetically conditioned brain dysfunctions, to this list.[3]

There is no consensus in the field about the proper approach to understanding problem gambling, but the dominant paradigms[4] within research and certainly within treatment seem to be the cognitive[5] and the behavioral[6] approaches. The focus of these approaches is the gambler's cognitive and emotional states. In the cognitive approach, problem gambling is understood as the result of an irrational and erroneous cognitive perception of the game, that is, gamblers believe they are able to control or predict the outcome of a purely random series of events. In the behavioral approach, excessive gambling is viewed as a compulsive response to emotional tensions such as anxiety, stress, depression, loneliness, or even joy. Treatment programs based on one or both of these models work to "correct" erroneous perceptions of the game in the gambler or to help her "unlearn" her emotional patterns of response.

While these models are primarily focused on the subjective constitution of the gambler, little analytical attention is directed at the different constitutions of the games gamblers play. Hence, these models have been criticized for operating with a homogenous notion of problem gambling:

> The pervasive but faulty assumption embedded within each model is that pathological gamblers form a homogeneous population, and that theoretically derived treatments can be applied effectively to all pathological gamblers irrespective of gambling form, gender, developmental history or neurobiology.[7]

Recently, awareness has emerged within this field of research that only to a limited extent is it possible to understand problem gambling as a univocal phenomenon across different types of games and different types of gamblers.[8] This limitation is particularly marked when we look at problem gambling in relation to poker.

In several of the previous chapters in this book, we have seen that poker is structurally different from most other gambling games. In the context of the current chapter, the two most important structural characteristics of poker are (1) poker is a game of skill *and* chance; (2) poker is played between a number of individual players and not against "the house."

The element of chance means that the phenomenon of problem gambling does indeed exist in connection with poker as it does in connection

with other gambling games. However, the coexisting element of skill makes it possible for players to improve their winning chances in the game and the fact that opponents are imperfect human beings and not a "house" with a structural statistical edge in the game makes it possible to play the game profitably. These structural characteristics in poker feed through to the way problem gambling manifests itself in relation to poker.

Controversy exists on the proper terminology for the designation of gambling disorder.[9] "Pathological gambling," "compulsive gambling," "problem gambling," and "gambling addiction" are all common terms used to describe the disorder. In the current analysis we are not primarily concerned with the underlying psychiatric characteristics of gambling disorders, so we are not going to open the discussion of the proper definition of the phenomenon, which relates to questions of whether gambling disorder is a compulsion, an addiction, an impulse control disorder, and so on. Our concern is rather the phenomenology of the disorder, that is, a mapping of the complex of problems players may experience in relation to poker. For matters of clarity of presentation, we have thus settled on the term "problem gambling."

In the official classification of psychiatric disorders by World Health Organization, we find the following definition of problem gambling:[10]

> The disorder consists of frequent, repeated episodes of gambling which dominate the individual's life to the detriment of social, occupational, material, and family values and commitments.[11]

This broad definition captures very well the complex of problems characteristic to problem gambling; including problem gambling in relation to poker. However, if we proceed to the elaboration of the definition, the applicability to poker becomes more problematic:

> Those who suffer from this disorder may put their jobs at risk, acquire large debts, and lie or break the law to obtain money or evade payment of debts. They describe an intense urge to gamble, which is difficult to control, together with preoccupation with ideas and images of the act of gambling and the circumstances that surround the act. These preoccupations and urges often increase at times when life is stressful.[12]

The elaboration identifies two types of problems. The first is the material dimension of problem gambling and it relates to the financial ruin that is typically the outcome of excessive gambling. The second is the subjective dimension, which is constituted by loss of self-control and bounding of

mental energy in the constant focus on gambling. Indeed, both of these dimensions are relevant also in relation to poker and problem gambling in poker, but contrary to most other gambling games, the two dimensions do not necessarily occur concurrently in poker.

If a gambler is addicted to playing slot machines, there is a directly proportional relation between the temporal amount of his gambling and the severity of his financial ruin. As we are going to see in this chapter, the relation between the material and the subjective consequences of problem gambling in poker is more complex and allows a greater spectrum of variation in the way problem gambling manifests itself.

We can get a further idea of the inadequacy of conventional theories of problem gambling in relation to poker when we take a look at the conventional screening tools for gambling disorder. The American Psychiatric Association (APA) has developed a set of diagnostic criteria to identify the disorder. In the most recent version, a person is diagnosed as a pathological gambler if he exhibits at least five of the criteria shown in table 6.[13]

POKER PLAYERS AND DSM-IV

Interestingly, the issue of problem gambling is often discussed in poker forums on the Internet. These forums were originally developed for poker

TABLE 6.   Diagnostic Criteria for Pathological Gambling

1. Is preoccupied with gambling (e.g., preoccupied with reliving past gambling experiences, handicapping or planning the next venture, or thinking of ways to get money with which to gamble)
2. Needs to gamble with increasing amounts of money in order to achieve the desired excitement
3. Has repeated unsuccessful efforts to control, cut back, or stop gambling
4. Is restless or irritable when attempting to cut down or stop gambling
5. Gambles as a way of escaping from problems or of reliving a dysphoric mood (e.g., feelings of helplessness, guilt, anxiety, depression)
6. After losing money gambling, often returns another day to get even ("chasing" one's losses)
7. Lies to family members, therapist, or others to conceal the extent of involvement with gambling
8. Has committed illegal acts such as forgery, fraud, theft, or embezzlement to finance gambling
9. Has jeopardized or lost a significant relationship, job, or educational or career opportunity because of gambling
10. Relies on others to provide money to relieve a desperate financial situation caused by gambling

players to exchange knowledge and strategies and to get response and evaluation on their ways of playing in different game situations, but their scope has expanded to include all kinds of poker-related topics. In one forum, pokernet.dk, there have been a number of posts discussing the validity of the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria.

In response to criterion 1, on the preoccupation with gambling, one discussant notes:

> I am interested in poker and the intellectual challenge of the game. I become absent because I am CONCENTRATED. Once in a while, a hand pops up in my mind that makes me absentminded in a conversation, just as everything else you might be interested in might pop up.[14]

In chapter 6, we saw that concentration is one of the key skills in poker and the ability to avoid distraction is a precondition for being a successful player. Furthermore, it is very common among poker players looking to improve their skills to spend time studying poker books and texts on the Internet and to evaluate their game by analyzing past hands. In this light, the discriminatory value of this diagnostic criterion seems to be very low, as most poker players beyond a modest level of skill do indeed display a significant degree of preoccupation with gambling.

In a similar discussion at another site, a blogger gives the following response to criterion 2:

> It goes without saying that when you have won 24,763 pots at the value of $100, the excitement of winning the last one is not as big as the excitement of winning the first. Thus, you have a need to increase the bet in order to achieve excitement. Whether you do this without thinking about the consequences or not is yet another matter.[15]

As we have seen, poker players are driven both by the desire to win money and by the desire to prove the superiority of their skills against other players. This means that the satisfaction and excitement players derive from the game come not only from betting money but also from the sheer competition. Since there is a correlation in the poker economy between the level of the stakes and the competing players' level of skill, there is a tendency for players to seek new challenges at higher levels if they have succeeded in beating the game at a lower level. In many cases, this advancement is not driven by the player's desire to gamble for higher stakes per se but rather by the desire to test his skills against stronger players. Comparably, a skilled tennis player will derive more excitement playing a chal-

lenging match against an opponent of equal skill than effortlessly defeating a novice. Thus, advancement to higher levels in the poker economy is not necessarily a symptom of an "increased level of tolerance" and "compulsiveness."

Another discussant provides the following response to criterion 4 that also raises certain questions in relation to criterion 5:

> The dog, the cat and the husband have been fed. The dog has been walked around the lake. Everything is ready for me to play the tournament I have been looking forward to.
>
> Ahhh, the game is on and everything goes as planned. Until suddenly my husband finds it extremely important, right in this moment to tell me about this and that very fancy car, or his job that sucks at the moment. (Jesus, couldn't you have just told me over dinner.)
>
> Or, the dog sits down and stares at you while it stomps its foot. It wants out. (Goddammit, you have just walked half the city in order to avoid this situation and yet the dog decides that is not good enough.)
>
> Irritated—tell me about it :)[16]

Even though there is a fair amount of sarcasm in the response, it does make a serious point. For many recreational players, poker provides an opportunity to take a break from the daily stress of work and chores. The game constitutes a mental space where the mind is completely focused on a very structured and well-defined objective. For some players, this is a space of relaxation and recreation. In this perspective, poker may indeed serve as a way of "escaping problems and relieving dysphoric mood" to many ordinary, nonpathological players, and "restlessness and irritability" when the game is interrupted are perhaps very natural responses.

In a certain sense, criterion 6 about "chasing losses" goes directly against basic poker strategy. The perspective of the long run tells poker players not to let themselves be deterred by momentary adversity. If a player has justified belief that he has an edge in the game at a particular level, he should stay in the game and keep coming back until the long run evens out swings caused by inferior opponents' momentary luck. Thus, when a poker player is coming back to a game despite a loss, it is not wholly unambiguous whether he is "chasing" in a pathological sense or whether he is just keeping a firm focus on the long run.

On the basis of these reservations on the applicability of criteria 1, 2, 4, 5, and 6 it can be argued that the standard screening tool is ill fit to diagnose problem gambling in relation to poker. When applied to poker, these

criteria become ambiguous, and it seems fair to suggest that many "normal" poker players would satisfy several of these criteria without necessarily having a compulsive relation to poker. Thus, the screening tool is biased in relation to poker with a tendency to misdiagnose some players as problem gamblers who do not in fact have a problematic relation to gambling.

Paradoxically, the screening tool may also contain a bias in the exact opposite direction. Criteria 8 and 10 are related to the monetary side of gambling, and they concern the way a gambler deals with the financial problems caused by his gambling behavior. However, the formulation of these criteria seems to be based on the assumption that excessive gambling behavior necessarily leads to financial problems. Often, this is indeed also the case, but the unique feature of poker is precisely that this is not always the case. A poker player may have a compulsive relation to poker but at the same time be a winning player or at least be able to break even. The fact that he does not satisfy criteria 8 and 10 may thus provide a false sense of security that he does not have a gambling problem since he does not suffer from any negative financial consequences from his poker playing.

A thread in one of the poker forums on the Internet was started with the question: "Who feels like a compulsive gambler?" One of the comments to this question sums up very nicely the ambiguity of the standard diagnosis of problem gambling in relation to poker:

> Nah . . . probably not according to the standard criteria. But then you also have to incur debts, lie and be almost totally f—— up.
>
> If we are only talking about "a certain addiction to gambling" and about feeling the need to experience the excitement of having something (money) at stake—well, in that case I am probably to some extent a compulsive gambler!
>
> When I look at my worst days, I often play on in solid adversity. We might call this tilt or we might call it a sign of compulsive gambling.
>
> However, all in all I live with it fine as long as most of the days at the tables are a positive experience and the game makes a profit.
>
> I believe it is difficult for most players to answer the question of compulsive gambling without a precise definition of the word "compulsive gambling." After all, the Center for Ludomani [a therapy center] almost takes it for granted that you cannot play a lot and for big money without failing. Most of us know that this is not true but on the other hand you probably also have to recognize that most of us would have a hard time stopping, even if we are no longer able to beat our level of the game. Or what?[17]

The point of the preceding argument is very much in line with this comment. On the one hand, poker and poker players do not fit very well into our standard notions and diagnosis of problem gambling. On the other hand, this should not lead to the conclusion that problem gambling does not exist in poker. However, we need new concepts to understand the way compulsiveness manifests itself in poker.

The basic notion of addiction underlying the APA's screening tool for pathological gambling is derived from research in psychoactive substance dependence, and the DSM-IV criteria for pathological gambling thus follow closely the criteria used to identify addictions to alcohol, heroin, cocaine, and other drugs.[18]

Dependence on psychoactive substances is characterized by close interconnectedness between the organic and the subjective dimensions of the addiction. The addiction may be triggered by a certain subjective disposition—say the individual experiences stress, anxiety, trauma, and so on and uses drugs or alcohol to cope with these feelings—or simply by the physiological effects of drugs or alcohol on the body—say the individual starts using drugs or alcohol for recreational purposes and then develops an addiction as the biochemical composition of his brain is altered by the psychoactive effects of the substances—or, as is probably most often the case, a combination of both. Once the individual's use of drugs or alcohol has increased beyond a certain threshold, the subjective and the organic effects of the consumption of the substances start mutually reinforcing each other and they become intertwined in a way that makes it almost impossible to distinguish the two dimensions of the addiction.[19]

An excessive use of alcohol may, for instance, prevent an individual from living up to his obligations at work. As a result, he may lose his job. This change in his subjective life situation may then again be traumatizing, and in order to cope with this trauma he increases his consumption of alcohol. This increase may then enforce his physical symptoms of dependence: inattention, loss of concentration, irritability, delirium, and so on. These symptoms may then in turn make it impossible for him to live up to his family obligations, and he may suffer an even more traumatizing loss of his wife. And to cope with this trauma, he drinks even more. And so on . . .

As long as we identify gambling with games of pure chance, or at least games with a negative expected value for the gambler such as roulette, craps, slot machines, or sports betting, it seems justified to understand problem gambling within the same paradigm of addiction as psychoactive substance dependence. Obviously, there is no organic dimension in prob-

lem gambling in the same way as in drug addiction or alcoholism. In turn, there is a material or economic dimension to gambling. In the development of problem gambling, this material dimension complements the subjective dimension in a way comparable to the interconnection between the organic and the subjective in drug addiction.

Say an individual starts gambling on slot machines to escape from or cope with psychological problems or perhaps just for recreation. If the extent of his gambling exceeds a certain threshold, his behavior is going to have harmful effects on his general economic situation. Slot machines have a negative expected value, and it is not unusual for machines to be operating at an average hourly rate of $50–$100. Furthermore, it is common for inveterate gamblers to be playing on several machines simultaneously. So unless the individual is well provided (and if he was, he would probably find another game where the possible wins and losses were proportional to his general financial situation), a gradual increase in his gambling behavior is soon going to have serious effects on his financial situation. And once beyond this threshold, the material and the subjective side of the compulsion start mutually enforcing each other. The individual may have to lie to cover up for money lost through gambling, or he may be forced to commit criminal acts to support his habit. As a result, personal or professional relations may be jeopardized or even broken. Again, this may have traumatizing effects on the individual and he may increase his gambling either in the hope of winning his way out of the problems or just to escape subjective feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, despair, and so on. Such increase in his gambling behavior worsens his financial circumstances, leading to a self-reinforcing dialectic between the subjective and the material dimension in the development of the compulsion.

In the previous section, we saw that poker does not fit well into the DSM-IV screening tool developed by the APA. It seems fair to argue that this misalignment is merely the symptom of a more fundamental incongruence between poker and the paradigmatic notion of addiction underlying the screening tool. What distinguishes poker from this notion of addiction is that the subjective and the material dimensions in the development of problem gambling in poker are not directly and unambiguously coupled. This differs from psychoactive substance dependency, where the subjective and the organic dimension are closely related, and from problem gambling in games of pure chance, where the subjective and the material dimensions are also closely related.

In the following, we are going to explore the problem complex in prob-

lem gambling in relation to poker, and we are going to see how the fragmentation of this problem complex allows multiple forms of connections between the material and the subjective, resulting in multiple forms of problem gambling.

PROBLEM GAMBLING AS LACK OF SKILLS

In chapter 6, we looked into the seven skills of poker crucial to succeed at the game. In the current chapter, we shall be returning to these skills to see how they can be used as a terminological framework to understand not only what it takes to be a professional poker player but also the different ways you can be a problem gambler. The idea is that different types of problem gamblers in poker may be discriminated by their lack of certain types of skills.

In table 5 (in chapter 6), the seven skills are ordered in a continuum from game skills to metagame skills. For the purpose of the following analysis, this continuum is broken down into three distinct categories of skills. The first category includes the first two skills, *technique and strategy* and *reading skills*. These are termed "game skills." The second category includes *game selection*, *bankroll management*, *concentration*, and *tilt control*. These are termed "metagame skills." And the final category includes only the skill of *goal-setting*. As it was already suggested in chapter 6, this skill is considered to be an "ethical skill." The quality of this skill is the ability of the player to connect poker to the rest of his life and to make sure that his playing makes an overall positive contribution to his life as a whole.[20]

Even though the official APA screening tool for pathological gambling is not wholly adequate in relation to poker, the original WHO definition of pathological gambling still seems to be fitting for the problem complex faced by problem poker players. At the core of this definition is the notion that the measure of problem gambling is the contribution to the individual's life as a whole. According to the definition, gambling is a disorder at the moment when it starts functioning "to the detriment of social, occupational, material, and family values and commitments," that is, when gambling makes an overall negative contribution to the gambler's life.

Combining the WHO definition of problem gambling with the table of the seven skills of poker, the difference between problem gambling in poker and just ordinary, noncompulsive, nonpathological poker playing can be conceived as a lack of ethical skill. As long as a poker player is able to manage the boundary between game and life in such a way that the game

does not interfere with his ability and possibility of shaping his life as a whole in accordance with "social, occupational, material, and family values and commitments," he does not qualify as a problem gambler.

However, the lack of ethical skill only accounts for the difference between problem gambling and nonpathological poker playing. On the basis of the other categories of skill, it is possible to deduce further distinctions between different types of problem gamblers in poker. These distinctions are summarized in table 7.

There are two remaining categories of skills: game skills and metagame skills, and two qualitative possibilities: lack or mastery. These combine into four different types of problem gambling. The *conventional* problem gambler lacks game skills, metagame skills, as well as ethical skill. The *tilted problem* gambler has a mastery of the game skills but lacks both metagame skills and ethical skill. The *breakeven* problem gambler lacks the game skills, masters the metagame skills, but lacks the ethical skill. And finally, the *winning problem* gambler masters both game skills and metagame skills but lacks the ethical skill.

Again, these types of problem gamblers should be considered as ideal types. They provide a map for the understanding and overview of the problem complex faced by problem gamblers. In the following sections, this map is used to order different statements and points from the empirical material, and conversely these statements serve as illustrations of the way the different types of problem gambling manifest themselves. The background for the designations of the four different types should become clear as the analysis is unfolded.

TYPOLOGY OF PROBLEM GAMBLING IN POKER

In the previous chapter, one approach to poker was that of the Sucker. The Sucker plays poker with little regards to probability theory, logic, and other strategic considerations. He plays to be part of the action and to experience the thrill of throwing himself into the game at the mercy of lady

TABLE 7. Types of Problem Gambling and Lack of Skills

	Conventional	Breakeven	Tilted	Winning
Game skills	lack	lack	mastery	mastery
Metagame skills	lack	mastery	lack	mastery
Ethical skills	lack	lack	lack	lack

luck. In a sense, the Sucker plays poker as if it were a game of pure chance. The Sucker is characterized by lack of both game skills and metagame skills.

A gambler with the Sucker's approach who lacks also the ethical skill of balancing his gambling behavior with his life and develops a gambling disorder is what we shall be referring to as a *conventional* problem gambler.

One interviewee who had suffered from a gambling disorder in his teens and twenties but is now recovered describes his way into gambling:

> I sought out slot machines, and they became my preferred entry into the gambling universe. I learned how the machines worked and I discovered the few possibilities of influencing the game that you have. Then the road into other games was paved, and when I was old enough I started playing poker and casino games. Along the way you learn something all the time, but you learn the expensive way.

In this person's approach to slot machines, we find a classic example of the phenomenon that cognitive psychology refers to as a "cognitive distortion."[21] The gambler does not realize the pure randomness of the slot machine, and he looks for patterns in the series of outcomes, machines "running hot" or other fallacious strategies. This interviewee also says poker has over the years "cost him a fortune," and it may be suspected that he carried over into poker this notion of chance and these kinds of strategies. Insofar as this is the case, he represents the *conventional* type of problem gambling. He does not master the game skills and the metagame skills of poker, and his approach to poker does not differ significantly from his approach to gambling games of pure chance.

As the conventional problem gambler's approach to poker results in a negative expected value on his engagement in the game, we find in his problem complex the same intertwining of subjective and material symptoms we find in problem gambling in relation to other gambling games: Subjective distress causes excessive gambling, resulting in material loss, which again causes further distress leading to further gambling, further loss, and so on.

A marked characteristic of the conventional problem gambler is that poker is rarely the only game he plays. This is the case with the interviewee who started with slots. Since his gambling behavior is driven by excitement over the interaction with chance, he may find this same excitement in slot machines, roulette, blackjack, and so forth. A common trend among most of the other interview persons, ordinary players as well as problem gam-

blers, was a lack of nterest in gambling games of pure chance. Some of them also engaged in sports betting, but other than that, their interest in gambling was directed exclusively toward poker.

The next type in the typology of poker players in chapter 7 is the Grinder. The Grinder is characterized by a highly patient and disciplined approach. If a Grinder loses his ethical skill of balancing poker with the rest of his life while at the same time retaining his metagame skills of handling himself in the game, he may fall into the category of the *breakeven* problem gambler.

Ideal-typically, the breakeven problem gambler has a complete lack of game skills. However, even players with a considerable degree of mastery of game skills may fall into this category. The primary characteristic of the breakeven problem gambler is that his metagame skills, in particular game selection and bankroll management, prevent him from engaging in games which could have a significant impact on his overall economic situation. Whether he wins or loses, the amounts in play are negligible relative to his life situation.

One interview person explains:

> I know people who play for several hundreds of dollars just in the blinds. That is not for me, I just cannot do it. I do not want to. As I said, I do have a family. Maybe you can win $200–$300 and then you can make a profit, but I do not want to risk that kind of money. That is why I am still playing at the lower levels. I also find it satisfying when I go deep in a tournament or even win a tournament, even if I play at the lower levels.

This person is a fairly skilled and highly disciplined poker player. In his local poker club, he is referred to as being "bone dry," that is, a very tight player. He plays primarily in small-stakes tournaments and even likes to play limit poker, which generally has a much lower level of "action." Over the course of four years, he has made a profit of approximately $30,000. He holds a regular job, and the profits from poker do not make a significant difference to his overall economic situation. In this light, he appears to be a well-balanced, ordinary recreational poker player.

Yet he also explains that poker often takes up most of his waking hours when he is not working: "I do not even dare count the hours I spend on it every week. It is almost from the moment I step through the door and until I go to bed. But it has actually been worse than now." His wife is present during part of the interview and she comments:

>I would only see his back. . . . He plays too much. I do not mind him
>playing, but . . . I always feel turned down when I try to have a conver-
>sation with him because he does not listen. I can ask the same question
>three times and then I just shut down again. . . . Also at birthdays or if
>we have a party. I am tired of it. I liked it myself once and we went to-
>gether to play in the club. Now I am tired of it.

What this player exemplifies is a situation where the subjective conse-
quences of the gambling disorder are present, that is, absorption in gam-
bling at the expense of personal relations, without the negative material
consequences we normally connect with problem gambling.

The problem complex of the breakeven problem gambler may be com-
pared to that of someone suffering from Internet addiction.[22] Excessive
gaming or similar excessive use of the Internet does not in itself cause ma-
terial or organic harm to the user, but the time spent on the Internet may
prevent the addicted individual from developing other spheres of life.

A poker player with a certain degree of mastery over the fundamental
game skills of poker, that is, technical skills and opponent reading, will ex-
perience periods where his engagement with the game has a positive finan-
cial return. However, if he does not master the metagame skills of game se-
lection, bankroll management, concentration, and especially tilt control,
these periods are bound to be short lived, and his temporary profit is most
likely to be offset by sessions of significant losses and sometimes even
transformed into an overall negative result. In terms of the typology of
poker players from chapter 7, this approach lies in the border zone be-
tween the Player and the Sucker. The player oscillates between these two
typical approaches as he oscillates between a state where he masters the
game through creative moves and a state where he tilts, takes unjustified
chances, and regresses into sheer gambling.

This oscillation is a common experience among leisure players, but
most often the entertainment, the excitement of engaging with poker, is
well worth the money lost, and the game makes an overall positive contri-
bution to the player's life. However, for some players the scope, extent, and
effects of momentary instances of tilt are not contained by the player's eth-
ical skill of balancing his behavior in the game with other dimensions of his
life. The state of being on tilt extends beyond the immediate sphere of the
game. Not only are the player's game skills impeded in the state of tilt, but
his ethical skill is upset.

The excerpt below stems from an interview with a former player who

was participating in a program for the treatment of problem gambling at the time of the interview. For the first three years of her gambling career, she was playing only small-stakes tournaments on the Internet and no more often than once or twice a week. She was a reasonably skilled player, and for a while her playing turned a profit and she managed to win a number of tournaments with more than a thousand players, cashing out prizes in the range of $3,000 to $6,000. Then, she explains, a rather sudden transition in her relation to poker occurred. She identifies the transition as the emergence of a problem gambling disorder:

IP: Before I became addicted and I was only playing for fun, I had a good feeling after the game—regardless of whether I had won or lost. If I lost, I was thinking: "Well, better luck next time." Obviously, I might be slightly annoyed that the opponent caught this particular card or that he decided to call me, but in general, I was fine. If you won, obviously you were extra happy. However, after I became addicted to it and I had spent so much money on it, it was a bad feeling—regardless of whether you had won or lost.

OB: What kind of feeling?

IP: A feeling of shame that you are not able to control yourself. . . .

OB: Did your way of playing change?

IP: When you are not addicted, you play much better. You are more patient and you have much more track of the other players. You are not thinking that you just have to get more chips. That's what you do when you end up in the addiction. You are not thinking as broadly. You are only thinking about yourself and that you want more and more. When you are not addicted, you have more patience. If two players go all-in, you think: "They are probably going to hit. We are one too many to go all-in, so I pull out. They are damn well going to hit their king or their ace." But when you are only focused on yourself, you take many stupid chances. And of course you can be lucky sometimes, but the odds are that there will be more times when your cards do not stand up because they are not good enough.

OB: Did you play the same levels of stake before and after?

IP: When the compulsive gambling kicked in, I went up. I used to play up to $20 tournaments, and I played mostly tournaments. After the compulsive gambling kicked in, I played up to $200 and $300 tournaments and I would play several tournaments at a time because I

> wanted to win. Then I would have four windows open [in online poker] and then you cannot concentrate on the games. Again, you are only concentrating on yourself.

We see here how tilt and problem gambling become two sides of the same coin. There is a simultaneous deterioration of her game skills, metagame skills, and ethical skill. She loses her ability to find enjoyment in the game (lack of ethical skill); she loses her concentration and does not follow the rules of proper bankroll management and game selection (metagame skills); and she loses her patience to play only strong hands and her tracking of other players (game skills). This pattern is symptomatic for the *tilted* problem gambler.

In the end, the problem complex of the tilted problem gambler may be very similar to that of the conventional problem gambler. In both cases, the subjective dimension of the disorder (feelings of shame, lying to relatives, loss of self-control, etc.) is eventually intertwined with the material dimension (financial loss). Nevertheless, it is in some respects relevant to make a distinction between the two types of problem gamblers and to note particular characteristics in the tilted problem gambler.

First, the material dimension of the tilted problem gambler's problem complex is not necessarily a linear progression toward financial ruin. His problem might be an enormous variance in his overall financial situation due to lack of bankroll management and inability to separate gambling money and living money. As the tilted problem gambler can have extended periods of profitable play, it may take a longer while for him to recognize that he is suffering from a gambling disorder. One interview person who is now enrolled in therapy to treat his gambling disorder explains that he feels "lucky" to have hit a heavy losing session, as he would otherwise probably not have recognized his problem. In hindsight, he realizes that his poker playing has had a negative effect on his mental well-being, his relation to his son, his relations to friends, and so on, but his occasional periods of wins veiled these problems.

Second, the tilted problem gambler may have a justified belief that he is in fact a skilled poker player. He may have experienced periods in his career when he was indeed able to master the different aspects of the game. This belief cannot be written off as mere "cognitive distortions." The tilted problem gambler will probably find it hard to identify with the conventional problem gambler and with gamblers who are addicted to games other than poker, as he finds himself to have a calculative and rational ap-

proach to the game. If he is to recover from the disorder, the tilted problem gambler must be brought to the realization that despite his intellectual ability to master the technical dimension of the game he does not have the character to manage his own self in the game.

In some cases, the state of tilt may become so severe that the player turns to other games in order to satisfy an increased craving for action. Interview persons report that their experiences of tilt have made them switch from tedious tournament play to cash games or even from Texas Hold 'Em to the much more volatile game of Omaha. Furthermore, even some highly professional poker players are known to have a weakness, a "leak," for games of pure chance such as craps, or other games where they are not be expected to have an edge, such as sports betting. The most famous example is perhaps legendary Stu Ungar, the only player to have won the WSOP three times, and yet he managed to gamble away all of his poker winnings on other gambling games.[23]

As we have already touched upon, the measure of whether an individual's gambling behavior is pathological or not is the contribution gambling makes to the individual's life as a whole. As long as we can regard gambling as an activity, separate from other spheres of the individual's life, this measure works reasonably well. It is possible to trace the impact of gambling on the individual's "social, occupational, material, and family values and commitments" and to evaluate whether this impact is significantly "detrimental."

Looking at poker players with high levels of game skills and metagame skills, the picture is, however, severely complicated. For some of these players, poker is not only an entertaining leisure activity. It is also a career path that they are pursuing with great vigor and seriousness. These are the professional players we have already encountered in chapter 6. And for these players, poker is no longer just a game, it is also a job. Just because poker is a job does not mean that it cannot also be a compulsion. However, the evaluation of the question of compulsion becomes much more difficult. This difficulty pertains to the identification of the *winning problem* gambler.

In the exploration of the ideal type of the Player, we have seen that highly skilled professionals do in fact possess a sheer and irrational drive to gamble. This drive is not eliminated from their game, yet it is managed in order to serve as the motor for their focused engagement with poker and as motivation for the constant improvement of their game. It is, however, the same gambling drive that turns some gamblers into problem gamblers. The difference between the problem gambler and the professional Player

is therefore not that one has a strong drive to gamble and the other does not. The difference lies in their ability to manage this drive.

The following comments come from a professional who makes his living playing poker both live and online.

> Now I play maybe six to seven hours per day. But before I used to play all the time. Basically, I just slept and played. I have run sessions—my record is 42 hours without sleeping—only on Red Bull and coffee. I just had to beat my opponent. And I have had many sessions of more than 20 hours, only taking breaks to eat or go to the bathroom and otherwise just playing ahead. It was completely insane. I did not leave the house. When I lived in my old flat, I hardly left the house for six months. I didn't even bother emptying my mailbox. Nothing mattered, but poker. I just wanted to be good.

This behavior obviously has the characteristics of problem gambling. However, instead of propelling the player into a vicious circle of financial ruin and subjective problems, his excessive gambling behavior trained his skills and opened up a career path as a professional.

Another professional gives a similar account of his development as a poker player:

> I was once addicted in the sense that at a time when I had split with my girlfriend I gambled as a way of escaping reality. Then I started making money on it, which is rather untraditional. Then I felt able to defend it, and then I gambled more and more, constantly, because I was good at it and I was making really a lot of money. I did not feel that it was escapism anymore but rather a job. I talked to people about what to call it, whether it was a mania or what.

On the one hand, addiction and job are mutually exclusive. First he was addicted, then it became a job. On the other hand, the question of whether it is an addiction or a mania still persists, and he feels the need to discuss this with other people even when poker has become a job.

When poker functions as a job in an individual's life, that is, when the game is his primary working activity and he is successful enough to support himself and his family, if he has one, from regular profits won in the game, it is only natural that the game takes up a significant amount of his time and mental focus and even constitutes an important part of his identity. This is the way work functions in many lives, and we would not consider these people to be compulsive. It makes little sense to regard gambling by pro-

fessional poker players as an activity separate from the rest of their lives. Rather, poker is an integrated part of their lives. The game provides their primary source of income, poker is their occupation, and much of their social activity is facilitated by the game.

When poker is an integrated part of an individual's life, it can be very difficult to identify whether gambling has an overall negative or positive effect on his life, that is, whether the individual is a winning problem gambler or just a nonpathological professional poker player. There is no distinct "nongambling life" in which we can identify possible detrimental effects from gambling. What could be the "detrimental" effects of gambling on an individual's "occupational values and commitments," if gambling *is* the individual's occupation? And what could be the "detrimental" effects of gambling on an individual's "material values and commitments," if gambling *is* the individual's primary source of income?

In the development of conventional problem gambling, the material and the subjective enter into a vicious circle of mutual reinforcement, forcing the gambler further and further into an addictive relation to gambling. In the case of the winning problem gambler, the relation between the material and the subjective is obviously different as the excessive gambling behavior leads to material affluence rather than ruin. Still, the effects of poker on the material and occupational dimensions of the professional poker player's life are ambiguous.

The experience of winning and losing large amounts of money may disturb the player's ordinary sense of money.[24] Here is how one player, who identifies himself as problem gambler, describes the way poker has affected his sense of money:

> It did not touch me whether I won or lost 100,000 crowns in one night's session. It was the same feeling when I sat down at the table, and it was the same feeling the day after. It did not touch me. Which is dangerous, and it is insane thinking about how it was the same feeling. It was the feeling that you just wanted to play. . . . So much cash has passed through my hands, and at the time I had no sense of money. In principle, it did not matter if I won one crown or one million. It was the same feeling, and it was good and comfortable. But the amount did not matter at all.

Since many aspects of life in society are structured by money, a disturbance of an individual's sense of money can have a severe impact on the way the way he fits into different social relations. One the one hand, poker may

provide a lucrative and exciting career path, but the engagement with the game may also disable the player from making a career shift even if he should wish to quit the game. These statements from professional players illustrate this ambiguity:

> I have eventually realized that I have become unsuited for ordinary work.

> I would not be able to hold a job. I often think about that. I used to work as an engineering worker on huge construction sites, and I had no problems getting up in the morning. But I cannot do that anymore. I have been spoiled by making so much money. I would feel ridiculous working for 100–120 crowns [$20–$25] an hour. And I would not be able to get up in the morning since my circadian rhythm is messed up.

> A few years back, a giant poker avalanche was rolling and now it just sticks and becomes an addiction. It makes no sense to have spent lots of time on it and then just give it up. . . . That is why poker is always going to exist, because people are not going to quit when they have spent years on it. When you feel that you have become really good, you want to keep developing yourself.

The point here is not that there are no problem gamblers among professional poker players. Nor is it that all professional poker players are problem gamblers. But in order to understand and identify compulsion among highly skilled poker players, that is, winning problem gamblers, it is necessary to look beyond the standard models of addiction, that is, the models derived from research in psychoactive substance dependency. Insofar as professional poker players themselves identify their gambling as a job, it may be relevant to understand the winning problem gambler in light of the kind of addiction we find in relation to work.

Within the field of research concerned with addiction to work there is a standing debate on whether "workaholism" is "good" or "bad."[25] Some scholars think of workaholism as an addiction akin to alcoholism and thus by definition bad,[26] while others see it as an expression of a passionate relation to work and a way to achieve job satisfaction and productivity.[27] The background of the dispute is, of course, that even a very high level of engagement in work, in terms of both time and emotional and mental commitment, cannot in itself be regarded as pathological. Thus, efforts have been made to develop models to discriminate between "good" and "bad" workaholism on the basis of the amount of time spent working and on the quality of the relation to the job.[28] One suggestion is to distinguish be-

Fig. 8. Typology of problem gambling in poker

tween "work engagement" and "workaholism" to discriminate between vigorous work enthusiasm and compulsive work addiction.[29]

Similar considerations are relevant to professional poker players and problem gambling. We have already seen that a certain amount of sheer gambling drive is necessary to become and to stay a top poker player. One interview person explains that professionals operate on the threshold of being problem gamblers. This is comparable to the ambivalent function of stress in the modern workplace. Stress functions, on the one hand, as the point where the subjectivity and productivity of the employee break down, but at the same time a certain amount of stress is itself a condition for the employee to stay motivated and to stay at the top of his productive capacity.[30] The challenge for the employee as well as for the professional poker player is to manage his drive, that is, stress or gambling drive, productively without sliding into the loss of self-control characteristic of the state of compulsion.

In this chapter, we have seen how different types of problem gambling in poker can be discriminated through players' lack of different types of poker skills. These types are understood as ideal types, that is, as different force fields in the complex of problems poker players may face. In figure 8, the four types are summarized.

The figure also illustrates how the different types of problem gamblers

are related to the ideal-typical approaches to playing poker, that is, the Sucker, Grinder, and Player. The conventional problem gambler is the pathological form of the Sucker. The breakeven problem gambler is the pathological form of the Grinder. The winning problem gambler is the pathological form of the Player. The double arrow illustrates that the tilted problem gambler oscillates between the position of the winning and the position of the conventional problem gambler. The tilted problem gambler is the pathological form of the oscillation between Player and Sucker.

As has been suggested throughout the chapter, these ideal types constitute not just different types of problem gambling within the same paradigm of addiction but also a set of paradigmatically different forms of addictions. While we may indeed understand the conventional problem gambler within a model of addiction similar to models of substance dependency, the other types of problem gambling in poker move beyond this model. The problems experienced by the breakeven problem gambler resemble those of someone suffering from computer or Internet addiction more closely than a drug addict or an alcoholic. And as we have just seen, the winning problem gambler is seemingly best understood by means of concepts developed in the field of workaholism. Finally, the oscillation of the tilted problem gambler may also be conceived as an oscillation between different paradigms of addiction.

NINE ♠
♣
♥
♦   What's in a Game?

All play means something.[1]

In this final part of the book, we are going to pick up on the question that was posed in the introduction. This is the question of the cultural significance of poker. We have seen that poker is composed to render an intricate ontological structure. We have also seen that the game is a major system for the circulation and redistribution of large amounts of money. And we have seen that individuals may become very intensely engaged with poker, in negative as well as in more positive ways. These analyses all seem to support the assumption made at the beginning of the book that poker signifies a rich cultural resonance. Like an important piece of art, a good novel, a great movie, or another kind of cultural expression, good games also have the capacity to capture fundamental features of the society in which they are popular. And poker *is* a great game. The task of the following analyses is to explore the cultural significance of poker to see how and why it resonates with society.

Before we can start probing the question of what it means to play poker, we should perhaps dwell for a moment on the more general question of what it means to play games. How do the games played in a particular society relate to the general culture of that society? What is the difference between playing a game and engaging in "ordinary," "serious" activities of societal life? What constitutes the boundary between the game and society, and what happens when this boundary is suspended? These are the questions to be unfolded in this chapter.

THE LAW AND THE RULE

To play a game is to venture into a curious domain, different and distinct from the ordinary world in which we live. The game institutes a temporary suspension of ordinary life and creates a microcosmos in which a certain restricted perspective on the world applies. In his seminal study *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga argues that the game creates an illusory world, which presents itself "as an intermezzo, an interlude in our daily lives."[2]

An obvious example is a game of football. Once the referee blows the whistle for kickoff, the players immediately start acting in a highly coordinated way that only makes sense from the perspective of the game. And the second the referee blows his whistle for the end of the game, the play world of the game is dissolved once again and the players immediately return to their ordinary patterns of behavior. People with no interest in football sometimes refer to the game as "twenty-two men chasing a ball around a big lawn." This is precisely how the game looks from the perspective of "ordinary life," but the description is at the same time ignorant of the very essence of the game. This essence becomes visible and comprehensible only when the game is viewed from the inside.

The distinction between play world and ordinary world is at first glance simple and familiar to most people. Even small children apply the distinction with great mastery. But as soon as we start reflecting theoretically on the difference, it becomes intricate and elusive. In order to grasp the difference between play world and ordinary world—between game and society—philosopher Jean Baudrillard has suggested the analytical distinction between rule and law.[3] Society is governed by the law, while the game is governed by the rule.

In order to understand the conceptual difference, it is important to note that when Baudrillard speaks of the law, he is not referring to law only in the strictly judicial meaning of the term. Baudrillard is rather drawing on a psychoanalytical tradition from Freud and Lacan in which the concept of law stands for any kind of social regularity, such as prohibitions, norms, values, morals, conventions, and so on, that structures the way we act and construct meaning in society. Law constitutes the social order of society.

Viewed from the perspective of an individual immersed in the daily life of society, the difference between the law of society and the rule of the game is a difference between necessity and arbitrariness. The law consists not only of a series of prohibitions and norms. It carries also an account of the justification and rationality of the law. The law tells us not only *what* we

should and should not do; it tells us also *why* we should or should not do this or that. The law claims to be valid and necessary regardless of the opinions held by the individual subject included in the law. The necessity of law is founded on transcendence. This may be the transcendence of a religious order, a principle of reason and rationality, or a system of tradition. In any case the law justifies itself with reference to some order beyond the immediate content of itself.

Contrary to the law, the game and the rule are characterized by their arbitrariness. The rule claims no justification beyond its immediate appearance. It does not profess to represent a higher religious order or rational principle. In this way the rule is purely immanent to the game. Furthermore, the rule tells the subject engaged in the game *what* to do and not to do, but it does not give him any reasons *why* he should follow the rule. When asked, the rule provides no other justification for itself than the mere reference to the game itself: "Because these are the rules of the game!" Baudrillard sums up the difference between the rule and the law: "The Rule plays on an immanent sequence of arbitrary signs, while the Law is based on a transcendent sequence of necessary signs."[4]

Think of the very simple game you can play when walking on the street in which you are not allowed to step on the lines between the flags of the pavement. The game is instituted by the invocation of the rule "Don't step on the lines!" This rule is purely arbitrary. The game could be played just as well with the complete opposite rule: "You must step on a line for every single step you take!" Furthermore, the rule gives no reason that it should be followed. It has no "formal, moral or psychological structure or super-structure"[5] to support its functioning. The functioning of the game is dependent on the voluntary submission to the rule by the players engaging in the game.

Compare this to the traffic regulations prescribed by law: "Don't walk in the street." "Cross the street only at the green light." These regulations apply unconditionally and must be obeyed by anyone regardless of whether he wants to or not. Traffic regulations come with a series of explicit and implicit reasons why they should be followed, for instance, that they secure the social order of the traffic situation for the safety of everyone.

The transcendence of law makes the validity of law unconditional. It is not up to the individual subject of law to decide whether he wants to submit to the law or not. Conversely, the purely arbitrary character of the rule sets free the subject and leaves it up to the individual whether he wants to participate in the game and become obliged by the rules of the game or

not. In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga indeed proposes voluntariness and freedom as the first in his list of characteristics of play.[6]

"because it's fun"

Law as understood by Baudrillard not only constitutes society. In the psychoanalytic tradition that Baudrillard is drawing on, law also plays a crucial role in the very constitution of the subject. To be a subject is to be subject to law. Without law, there would be no subject.

At first glance, law manifests itself as a prohibition banning our access to certain objects and acts. We may think of the law as an institution necessary in order to discipline our wild and otherwise uncontrolled desires for different forbidden things such as other people's property (Thou shalt not steal) or transgressive sexual acts (Thou shalt not commit adultery). In this line of thinking, a society without law would be an anarchical all-against-all with everybody satisfying her every desire at the expense of everybody else.

However, working along similar lines as Baudrillard, Žižek argues that law has also the latent function of structuring our very being as subjects since the law is what institutes our desires in the first place. When the law tells us not to do this or that, it carries an underlying fantasmatic message promising that beyond the prohibition of the law lie the objects that may satisfy the desire of the subject. Inherent in the law is the fantasy of what might happen if the law was not there to prevent me from pursuing my immediate desires.

As was the case with the concept of law, it is important to note that the concept of fantasy differs from its usual meaning. Here is how Žižek explains the term:

> Fantasy is usually c]onceived as a scenario that realizes the subject's desire. This elementary definition is quite adequate, on condition that we take it literally, what the fantasy stages is not a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, fully satisfied, but on the contrary, a scene that realizes, stages, the desire as such. The fundamental point of psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed—and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject's desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: *through fantasy, we learn how to desire*.[7]

Based on this understanding, Žižek often uses the concept of fantasy in conjunction with the concept of ideology.[8] Only on a very superficial level is fantasy opposed to law in the sense that we fantasize about the transgression or even the abolition of law. We might think here of consumerist fantasies of the kind where we imagine gaining access to products that we cannot afford to buy: "If only the law of property or the law of equivalences did not prevent me from having this sweater or that car I would . . ." On another level, fantasy and law work together in structuring the desire of the subject. By restraining the subject's access to the objects of desire designated by fantasy, law prevents the subject from realizing that the qualities and possibilities for enjoyment imagined to belong to the object are in fact projections of the subject's own fantasy. In this way, the different laws of the market restraining our access to consumer goods are the condition of possibility for the fantasmatic projections about the amount of happiness, enjoyment, and fulfillment we would attain if we had free and unlimited access to these goods.

The idea of law instituting order in an otherwise anarchical world of unrestrained desire (e.g., in Hobbes) is actually a myth produced in the domain of fantasy and ideology. First, the myth gives legitimacy to law by explaining why it is necessary, but second and perhaps more importantly the myth tells us what we would *really want* if it were not for the law restraining us. Thus, the message of the law is split into the explicit prohibition and the fantasmatic injunction to transgress the law.[9] In this way law interacts with fantasy in the domain of ideology in order to teach the subject what and how to desire.

An important implication of this understanding of the relation between fantasy and law is that even in transgression, the subject does not move beyond the domain of law. A thief illegally appropriating consumer goods by transgressing the law of property does not violate the fundamental principles for the structuring of desire in the consumer society. It may in fact even be argued that his transgressive act confirms the desirability of the consumer goods. Since the thief will go to such extremities in order to attain the goods, the goods must indeed be something extraordinary.

In Baudrillard's analysis of the difference between law and rule, we find the following reflection related to transgression:

> Ordinarily we live within the realm of the Law, even when fantasizing its abolition. Beyond the law we see only its transgression or the lifting of a prohibition. For the discourse of law and interdiction determines

the inverse discourse of transgression and liberation. *However, it is not the absence of the law that is opposed to the law, but the Rule.*[10]

Instead of transgression or absence of law, Baudrillard suggests the rule as being opposed to law. The argument is here not that by following the rule of the game, the player is violating the law of society. The point is rather the much more subtle one that by entering the sphere of the rule and the game the player moves beyond the ideological domain of the law.

Law, desire, and subjectivity tie into each other in a kind of Gordian knot. In the game, where law is substituted for the rule, this knot is cut. In its explicit contingency, the rule is not supported by fantasy. The rule does not hold a promise of satisfaction; no sublime object is imagined beyond the rule. The rule claims to be nothing more than what it is.

So what is the attraction of the rule and the game, if not satisfaction of a desire? Entering the game means voluntarily submitting to an arbitrary rule with no higher meaning. This act is, however, a way of delivering oneself from the law. Since transgression is already inscribed in the law even in the violation of a prohibition, we are still caught in the web of the law and its matrix of satisfaction/unsatisfaction. In the violation, we may contradict the explicit word of the law but we are still confirming its underlying principle of desire.

When choosing to submit to the rules of a game, however, we step into another order not structured by the law and desire. We renounce our desire, not in an ascetic abstinence from particular objects of desire (which is by the way only an extreme sublimation of the objects of desire), but by letting ourselves be seduced into an order not promising any kind of satisfaction at all. In this way, we move beyond the law's matrix of satisfaction/unsatisfaction. When obeying the law, our conscious rational belief in it is supported by an unacknowledged irrational belief. Yet, entering the game, we openly acknowledge the pure contingency of the rule, and so our conscious submission to it is based on no belief whatsoever. We have no illusions that the game is nothing but an illusion, and so our approach to the game is perhaps more "realistic" than our approach to the law.

> The game's sole principle . . . is that by *choosing the rule one is delivered from the law*. Without a psychological or metaphysical foundation, the rule has no grounding in belief. One neither believes nor disbelieves a rule—one observes it. The diffuse sphere of belief, the need for credibility that encompasses the real, is dissolved in the game. Hence their

immorality: *to proceed without believing in it*, to sanction a direct fascination with conventional signs and groundless rules.[11]

In the game, desire is suspended and so is desire's eternal shadow figure, unsatisfaction, which is a necessary condition for the reproduction of desire. In the game, there is no promise and therefore no disappointment. In the order of the law, we may find enjoyment in the momentary and partial satisfaction of our desires through obtainment of different objects. The joy of the game stems not from this kind of satisfaction but exactly from the suspension of the satisfaction/unsatisfaction matrix.

> In order to understand the intensity of ritual forms, one must rid oneself of the idea that all happiness derives from nature, and all pleasure from the satisfaction of a desire. On the contrary, games, the sphere of play, reveal a passion for rules, a giddiness born of rules, and a force that comes from ceremony, and not desire.[12]

As an equivalent to the "giddiness" of which Baudrillard speaks here, we find in Huizinga's characteristic of play the notion of "fun." People play games because it is fun. Rather than providing a full and conclusive explanation for the engagement in games, the concept of fun seems to mark the limitation of such an explanation. "The fun of playing," Huizinga notes, "resists all analysis, all logical interpretation."[13]

Think again of the game Don't Step on the Lines. Why would someone engage in this game? Why would someone chose to submit himself to the stupid and completely arbitrary rule of not stepping on the lines? In the obvious absence of sanctions, potential rewards or other kinds of meaningful satisfactions, the question can only be answered: "Because it's fun." This, however, is probably more of a displacement of the question than an actual answer.

In the tradition of psychoanalysis, we find also the concept of drive. Drive is opposed to desire insofar as desire is focused on a particular object imagined to provide satisfaction for the desire, whereas drive is not directed at any object. Drive is a short circuit unmediated by fantasy, where the joy of an act derives from the activity of acting itself. Here is how Žižek defines the difference between drive and desire:

> Drive . . . stands for the paradoxical possibility that the subject, forever prevented from achieving his Goal (and thus fully satisfying his desire), can nevertheless find satisfaction in the very circular movement of repeatedly missing its object, of circulating around it.[14]

The point is here of course that the concept of drive as opposed to desire provides an account of fun as opposed to the meaning of ordinary goal-oriented behavior. Here is how the distinction between goal-oriented desire and self-propelling drive turns out in the words of the legendary poker player Nick "The Greek" Dandalos: "The next best thing to gambling and winning is gambling and losing."[15]

GAME AS PARODY

We have seen that the rule is opposed to the law and that the choice of the rule delivers the player from the ideology of law. What does this say about the relation between game and society? We might for a brief moment be tempted to proclaim the playing of games as an act of criticism toward the ideology of society. This, however, would be jumping ahead, and it would fit very badly with the actual position held by different games in our society. How would we think, for instance, of Champions League football as a form of resistance toward society? Furthermore, our analysis has just shown that the domain of the rule and fun is characterized by arbitrariness and absence of meaning. Hence, it would be contradictory to project a certain critical and normative intentionality into the mere engagement in a game.

At the same time, the analyses carried out in this book are motivated by the assumption that there is indeed some kind of sociologically significant relation between the games played in society and society as a whole. This assumption is shared by Huizinga, whom we have already quoted saying: "All play means something."[16] In order to avoid the pitfalls of formally fixating the normativity of the meaning of games in relation to society by making general statements such as: "games constitute a critique of the ideology of society," "games constitute a celebration of societal values," "games constitute a way of governing the subjects of society," "games constitute a way of opposing dominant power structures of society," and so on, we shall once again turn to Baudrillard for conceptual support:

> *The rule functions as the parodic simulacrum of the law.* Neither an inversion nor subversion of the law, but its reversion in simulation. The pleasure of the game is twofold: the invalidation of time and space within the enchanted sphere of an indestructible form of reciprocity—pure seduction—and the parodying of reality, the formal outbidding of the law's constraints.[17]

Insofar as the game emerges as the institution of an extra set of rules governing the subject, it seems to constitute an addition to the order of the law. Perhaps the social significance of the game lies, however, in the subtraction of fantasmatic ideology from the prescriptions of law. On an immediate level, the rules of a game look like the law of society. The rule "Don't step on the lines" looks like the regulation "Only walk on a green light." However, on closer inspection the rule lacks the fantasmatic support of ideology. The game thus presents the rule in its naked arbitrariness.

To the extent that the rules of a game carry some similarity to particular laws of society, the institution of the game may affect and transform our view of the particular law. The subtraction of ideology in the game may make us aware of the ideological dimension of the law, thus causing us to view the law in the same "naked arbitrariness" as the rule.

According to Žižek, any law is inherently contradictory and basically founded on a violent and illegitimate move in which law constitutes itself as law. The obvious example here is of course the allegedly humanistic laws of democracy, which are founded on the cruel, violent, and anything but democratic brutality of the French Revolution. Underneath the surface of the normal, rational, legitimate, universal law lies a traumatic truth about the abnormal, irrational, illegitimate, contingent foundation of the law, and for law to function this traumatic truth must remain concealed. Žižek states: "Every reign of law has its hidden roots in such an absolute—self-referential, self-negating—crime by means of which crime assumes the form of law, and if the law is to reign in its 'normal' form, this reverse must be unconditionally repressed."[18] The function of ideology is to conceal the traumatic contradictions of law in order for law to function in a smooth and orderly fashion.

When the rule, in the words of Baudrillard, functions as *the parodic simulacrum of the law*, it simulates the law in the context of the play world. Since the play world is devoid of the fantasmatic projections of ideology, the rule stands forth in a more "naked" appearance than the way we are used to seeing the law. The rule of the game mimics law. It does not pretend to be law. In fact, the rule does not pretend to be anything more or less than what it is.

> Given that the rule is conventional and arbitrary, and has no hidden truth, it knows neither repression nor the distinction between the manifest and the latent. It does not carry any meaning, it does not lead anywhere; by contrast, the Law has a determinate finality.[19]

The absence of any kind of justification or rationalization transcending the rule produces a vacuum around the game. Contrary to the laws of the social order, the game does not explain or account for itself. It merely offers itself. Consequently, the game does not pass any critical or normative judgment on the law and society. However, the vacuum produced by the rule—the space devoid of ideology constituted by the game—opens the potential for critical reflections on the nature of law and society. Indeed, these reflections cannot be made from within the game. The game merely opens the space for such reflections.

Think of the game of boxing. Boxing is basically constituted by a set of rules permitting certain acts of physical violence and prohibiting others. The game displays violence in a completely denormatized fashion. The acts of violence constituting a boxing match are devoid of the moral judgment surrounding most acts of violence in ordinary society. Contrary to ordinary society, where the moral and legal character of acts of violence is determined relative to the motives behind the act, the game of boxing is indifferent to whatever motives the fighters may have for punching each other. But boxing does not tell us what to think about violence. It does not say whether violence is good or bad, legitimate or illegitimate, beautiful or ugly. Boxing merely presents us with violence in a very pure form. This creates a space for potential reflection on the ideological projections surrounding violence in ordinary society. How this space is filled it is up to the observer to determine.

THE RULES OF POKER AND THE LAWS OF CAPITALISM

Any game has social significance but obviously some games have greater significance than others. A central assumption to this book is of course that poker constitutes a game with a great amount of social significance. This assumption is supported by a number of circumstances.

First, as we have already touched upon, poker is today played by millions of people around the world. In itself this testifies to the fact that the game finds widespread resonance in contemporary culture.

Second, if we invoke the notion of "parodic simulacrum of the law," this cultural resonance can perhaps be explained by the fact that the game of poker provides a simulation of a set of laws that are at the very center of the constitution of contemporary society. These are the laws of capitalism. Insofar as these laws play a crucial role in structuring the lives of people

around the globe, many people find in poker a game that relates to the key features of their social being.

Third, not only does poker simulate key structuring principles of the social order, but the level of perfection in the simulation of capitalism is sometimes so great that it becomes difficult to distinguish the play world of poker from the real world of capitalist economy. In poker, the distinction between game and actual economic phenomena is blurred. For the individual player this adds another level of excitement to the game, and for the social scientist it poses an extra level of questions regarding the relation between poker and the ideology of capitalism.

When applying the distinction between rule and law to the relationship between poker and capitalism, it is important to note that this distinction should be regarded as ideal-typical rather than absolute. If we compare the game to Huizinga's classic characteristic of play, poker obviously does not qualify as play in absolute terms:

> Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it (1) a free activity, standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. (2) It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. (3) It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. (4) It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means.[20]

For 1: Poker may indeed qualify as a "free activity" but when we consider professionals playing high-stakes poker for a living, it is questionable whether the game can be characterized as "not serious" and "outside ordinary life." This question was already addressed in David Hayano's seminal ethnographic study of professional poker players in Gardena card rooms in the late 1970s; he concluded the following: "[T]he professional poker player, who travels between temporal and spatial game brackets every day, reaches a perceptual point where his distinction between games and nongames becomes blurred or even negligible. The metaphor has become a serious statement about life."[21] Hayano's findings are confirmed by the analyses of professional poker players in chapter 6 and the analyses of problem gamblers in chapter 8. For 2: Take away from poker the material interest and the possibility of gaining profit and you have taken away the heart

and soul of the game. What is left hardly qualifies for the name of poker. For 3: The rules of poker are indeed fixed but if we look at, say, an Internet poker player shuffling in and out of different poker games and playing 8 to 12 tables simultaneously, the temporal and spatial boundaries of his playing do not exactly seem "proper." The game itself, especially in the world of Internet poker, constitutes its own continuous reality with no temporal and spatial boundaries and it provides a permanent possibility for engagement for individual players regardless of time and space. For 4: Considering the massive advertising campaigns launched by numerous Internet providers of poker and the extensive media coverage of major tournaments, the community of poker players is hardly surrounded by "secrecy."

Poker is not the only game where the boundaries between ordinary life and play world are blurred. In most cases, the blurring, however, comes about because external factors "intrude" into the "pure" play world of the game. In professional sports such as football or cycling, players are motivated to enter the game by monetary rewards; they may jeopardize their general health by taking performance-enhancing drugs; and they may even let their performance in the game be affected by bribes. Still, money and drugs constitute foreign elements in football and cycling, and both sports may be played perfectly well without these elements. This is not the case with poker. In poker, money is the medium bridging the play world of the game with the ordinary world of capitalist economy. Contrary to professional sports, money constitutes an intrinsic element in the game of poker. Poker without real money is not poker.

It has been argued that in order for a poker game to function properly the minimum stakes must be set at a level that all players in the game respect.[22] Players should feel that they have something valuable at stake in order for them to become emotionally attached to the game. And the overcoming of this emotional attachment is part of the very game. The key to good poker playing is indeed to regard the chips as play money and play them not according to their value in ordinary life but according to the odds and strategies offered by the game. Furthermore, players should suppress their emotional attachment to the money involved in the game and avoid displaying anxiety when bluffing or excitement when betting a strong hand. Display of emotions may constitute "tells" that give away the nature of a player's hand and upset her strategy. At the same time a poker player should not forget the real value of the chips and start betting them recklessly, just to be part of the action. G. K. Chesterton makes a point in re-

gards to courage, which sums up very well the paradoxical relation to money in poker:

> A soldier surrounded by enemies, if he is to cut his way out, needs to combine a strong desire for living with a strange carelessness about dying. He must not merely cling to life, for then he will be a coward, and will not escape. He must not merely wait for death, for then he will be a suicide, and will not escape. He must seek his life in a spirit of furious indifference to it; he must desire life like water and yet drink death like wine.[23]

The difference between play world and ordinary world is reproduced within the game of poker and the balancing of the two worlds is an essential part of playing the game. Regarding chips as play money to be bet strategically and not as real money is to suspend the fantasmatic projections of ideology that constitute money as a "sublime object"[24] in ordinary society. However, the fantasmatic projections surrounding money should not be suspended so thoroughly that the player loses any respect for money. If this happens, he might lose the attachment to the value of money that disciplines his actions in the game and keeps his strategic focus.

The fact that poker does not fit perfectly into Huizinga's definition of play should, of course, not lead us to the conclusion that poker is not a game. In classical sociology, a commonplace analysis of modernity suggests that modern society, as opposed to premodern societies, is characterized by being differentiated into distinct value-spheres (Weber) or distinct functional units (Durkheim).[25] Huizinga's definition of play seems to operate within this theory of society insofar as he regards the play world of a game as a sphere completely distinct from ordinary society. Contrary to Huizinga's rigid theory of play, we should maintain that poker is indeed a game. A defining characteristic of poker is, however, that the game itself challenges the absolute boundaries between play world and ordinary world. If Huizinga's theory of play is modern, poker can be viewed as an eminently *post*-modern game insofar as it eludes unambiguous analytical distinction.

In Baudrillard we find rudimentary reflections on the relation between gambling and capitalism. He asks rhetorically:

> Can one produce a finer parody of the ethics of value than by submitting oneself, with all the intransigence of virtue, to the outcomes of chance or the absurdity of a rule? Can there be a finer parody of the val-

ues of work, economy, production and calculation than the challenge and the wager, or the fantastic non-equivalence between what is at stake and what might be won (or lost—both being equally immoral)?[26]

These are the reflections underlying the analyses of poker in the remaining part of this book. We shall be investigating how poker functions as parodic simulation of general principles of value, work, production, money, and class in capitalism.

The History of Poker

Hold'em is to Stud and Draw what chess is to checkers.
—*Johnny Moss, three-time world champion of poker*[1]

Poker is not one particular game but rather the generic term for a whole range of games sharing some basic principles. This means that Texas Hold 'Em, on which we have been focusing in the previous chapters, is just one among a variety of poker games. In this respect already, we find an apparent commonality between poker and capitalism. Capitalism too is not a definite form of society but rather a feature shared by a range of different forms of society.

The subject of this chapter is the history of poker. We shall be exploring how different structural variations of the game have evolved and how different types of poker have been dominant at different periods in history. Our interest, however, is not the particular history of poker in isolation. The object of analysis, rather, is the relation between poker and capitalism and their historical coevolution.

There are three main forms of poker: Draw, Stud, and Hold 'Em. In this chapter, it shall be demonstrated how the three forms emerged and became the most popular form of poker at three different phases in history. Furthermore, we shall be identifying structural homologies between the historical development of poker and key elements in the functioning of capitalism at different times in history. In short, the objective of this chapter is to trace back in history the parodic simulation of capitalism performed by poker.

POKER AT THE FRONTIER OF CAPITALISM

The primary characteristic of a game of poker is the "vying principle" by which players bet on who holds the strongest hand.[2] In poker, players do not "play" their cards as in whist, rummy, or most other cards games. Instead, the betting action makes up the actual playing, and money rather than cards is the actual instrument of the game. Hands may be won either by showing down the strongest hand or by intimidating other players into folding their hands before showdown. This introduces into the game the possibility of bluffing, which is also an intrinsic element of any form of poker. Another defining feature of poker is the assembling of hands into five-card combinations, which are ordered hierarchically based on their statistical likelihood. For example, three of a kind is stronger than two pairs, and a full house stronger than a flush. These two principles combine in a number of different ways, constituting different varieties of poker.

The origins of poker are not accurately recorded in history but the game may have evolved from European "vying games" such as English Brag, French Bouillotte, Italian Primera, Spanish Mus, and perhaps in particular the German game of Poch, which would account for the etymological roots of "poker."[3] Modern poker first emerged in the area around New Orleans in the beginning of the nineteenth century.[4]

Poker was first played in the very simple form of Flat poker, where each player is dealt five cards out of a twenty-card deck (containing only tens and higher cards).[5] Flat poker has only a single betting round followed by a showdown if more than one player is left in the pot. Obviously, this was a very primitive form of poker with little use for probability theory and only scarce information from which to deduce the content of opponents' hands other than possible physical tells revealing a strong hand or a bluff. Furthermore, in the early days of poker, when the game was played in the saloons of the Wild West and on the Mississippi riverboats, cheating was a common and almost integrated part of the game.[6] Flat poker is mostly a game of chance and bluff, but even at this early stage, poker was also a game of skills. The skills required in order to succeed at the game were, however, not so much about mathematics and logic but rather about having the psychological sense to judge whether your opponent is a sucker, a bluffer, a sharp, or perhaps even a cheat.

The essence of poker, which is common to all varieties of the game, lies in the complex interplay between the intrinsic strength of a hand according to the predefined hierarchy of card combinations and the representation of the hand through the betting action. The intrinsic hand-value and

the betting action constitute two distinct spheres in the game. If a hand goes all the way to showdown, the hand is determined in the sphere of intrinsic hand-value. And if all but one player folds before showdown, the hand is determined in the sphere of betting.

We can understand the relation between these two dimensions in the game by invoking Marx's distinction between use value and exchange value. The intrinsic hand value of a poker hand is comparable to Marx's notion of use value. In Marx, it is the utility of a thing that makes it a use value, and the use value of a commodity is an expression of the quantity of labor spent in its production.[7] A commodity has use value insofar as it embodies human labor. Obviously, a poker hand does not have utility in itself, nor has any amount of labor been spent in producing it. Still, the similarity between use value of a commodity and hand value of a poker hand is that value is conceived as being intrinsic to the thing itself.

In Marx, use value is contrasted to exchange value. The exchange value of a commodity is in the first instance constituted by its value in relation to other commodities, that is, the quantity of other commodities for which it may be exchanged in the market.[8] So far, the distinction between use value and exchange value seems to make no difference in regards to poker, since the value of a poker hand is precisely determined in relation to other hands. In other words, the value of three of a kind consists in the capacity to beat two pairs, one pair, and high cards.

One of Marx's great achievements is, however, the demonstration that when the exchange of commodities becomes mediated by money, the determination of exchange value may proceed semiautonomously from the commodity's use value. A market evolves in which the prices of commodities are determined according to market-immanent laws and not as reflections of the intrinsic use value of the commodities. This is the case with one special commodity in particular: labor. According to Marx, accumulation of profit in the capitalist mode of production relies on the ability of the market to set the price of labor at a level below the actual use value of this commodity. In effect, the capitalist appropriates the products of the worker's labor and sells these products at a higher price than he is paying for the labor.

If poker were played with open cards and hands were compared directly with each other, the game would transform into a mere game of pure chance. In fact, it would cease to be poker. The particular nature of the game emerges only when the comparison between hands is mediated by the monetary expressions of the betting action. We may thus conceive of the sphere of betting action as a kind of market in which the "price," or the

exchange value, of the hands is negotiated. To some extent the betting will reflect the underlying intrinsic hand value, but to some extent the betting may proceed detached from the intrinsic hand values.

A player holding a strong hand such as four of a kind may bet moderately in order to entice other players to add to a pot he expects to win at showdown. This kind of initial "underselling" of a strong hand is what we have been referring to as slow playing. A player holding a weak hand may conversely choose to bet his hand aggressively in order to drive other players out of the pot before showdown. This kind of "overselling" is of course the tactic of bluffing. Slow playing and especially bluffing are illustrative examples of the detachment of exchange value from use value in poker.

When Thomas Jefferson bought Louisiana from Napoleon in 1803, the road was opened for the westward expansion of the United States. At the time when poker emerged, New Orleans was a terminus on the American frontier between the civilized East and the vast unexplored, unexploited natural resources of the Wild West. In Marxist terms, the western territories constituted a reservoir of unappropriated use value and the westward expansion was driven by a desire to capitalize this value. Use value was thus realized by being incorporated into the existing cycles of capitalist exchange value. Hardt and Negri have analyzed this expansionist phase of capitalism as a process whereby capital appropriates value by subsuming its noncapitalist environment formally under capital: "In the process of capitalization *the outside is internalized.*"[9]

Along these lines, we can understand the difference between exchange value and use value as a difference between inside and outside of the expanding capitalism. Being situated right on the frontier, New Orleans functioned as a major point of exchange between East and West, a kind of membrane mediating the relation between inside and outside. New Orleans was the epicenter of the great forces set free by the capitalization of the hitherto unappropriated use value of the West. Insofar as poker simulates the detachment, discrepancy, and tension between use value and exchange value, its historical and geographical origin is perhaps no coincidence.

THE CIVILIZATION OF POKER AND THE TAMING OF THE WILD WEST

During the nineteenth century, poker saw a number of innovations and additions, which refined the game from the simple form of Flat poker into the more sophisticated form of Draw poker that is played today.

Between 1830 and 1850, players began playing the game with a full deck of fifty-two cards.[10] This paved the way for the recognition of the flush (five cards of the same suit) and the straight (five cards in consecutive order) as legitimate combinations, and by 1875, the full range of poker hands that we know today was complete.[11] In the second half of the century, another two features were added to the game, which were to make the game of poker even more distinct from its European predecessors.[12] The introduction of the draw means that players are given a second chance of improving their hand, in that they are allowed to exchange any number of cards from their initial hand for an equivalent number of cards in a second round of dealing. The introduction of "jackpots" prohibits players from opening the betting unless they hold a pair of jacks or better and mandating bets if they do hold jacks. If no player has a hand strong enough to open the betting, the compulsive bets in the form of antes and blinds are carried over into the next hand, thus creating a jackpot.

The initial motives for these changes brought about by professional sharpers may have been to increase profitability by allowing more players in a game, stimulating betting action, and enhancing opportunities for cheating.[13] The changes, however, are parts of a development that, according to card historian David Parlett, was "to turn Poker from a gamble to a science."[14]

The move from 20 to 52 cards and the recognition of straights and flushes in combination with the draw introduces more strategic options in the game and gives players with some notion of probability theory an edge. The power struggle between "made hands" (hands that need no improvement to win the pot, for instance three of a kind) and "drawing hands" (hands that are currently worthless but become very strong if they improve on the draw, for instance four cards to a flush) that is a crucial element of poker today is also made possible by these innovations. Another important consequence of the introduction of the draw and the additional round of betting is that players are given more information to work with in order to deduce the content of an opponent's hand. If, for instance, an opponent merely calls on the first round of betting, draws only one card and then bets aggressively on the second round of betting, there are justified reasons to believe he is holding a straight or a flush. Similarly, the introduction of jackpots not only contributes to limit the most reckless bluffing, it also gives players the possibility of gaining valuable information about opponents' possible holdings, provided players are able to process this information. In the fully developed form of Draw poker, capacity for logical de-

duction and a sense of probability theory supplement the ability to judge opponents' character as means to gain an edge.

We have seen how poker in its basic form relies on the difference and detachment of the sphere of betting from the sphere of actual hand values and how this difference may be conceived in terms of Marx's distinction between exchange value and use value. With the refinement of the game and the development of Draw poker during the course of the nineteenth century, this difference is taken one step further.

The detachment of exchange value from use value in Marx is, as we have already touched upon, the precondition for the exploitation of labor, that is, the exchange of labor below its use value. This exploitation is by no means coincidental, nor is it the result of coercion, deception, or theft. On the contrary, the capitalist mode of production is possible only as far as the worker has the legal right to dispose of her own labor power and is free to offer this labor power as a commodity for sale in the market.[15] The starting point of the exchange of labor and money in the market is an exchange of equivalents. Nevertheless, Marx demonstrates that capitalism develops structures in the market through which the surplus value generated within the sphere of production is distributed to the benefit of the owner of the means of production, that is, the capitalist. The market may indeed settle a salary for the worker large enough to secure the further reproduction of her labor power, but still the productivity of the labor power exceeds the value of this salary. This discrepancy constitutes the surplus value, which is appropriated by the capitalist. In other words, the market mechanisms of capitalist society perform a redistribution of value in the direction of the capitalist class.

As poker evolves and the strategic element comes to the fore at the expense of pure chance, the outcome of the game is to a higher degree determined by the players' strategic decisions rather than the random distribution of cards. In other words, the game is determined by the players' actions in the sphere of betting rather than the cards they are dealt in the sphere of hand values. Insofar as the sphere of betting is comparable to the negotiation of exchange value in the market, we can say that the evolution of poker from a game of chance to a game of strategy is comparable to the development of market-immanent mechanisms for the determination of exchange value in capitalist society. Winning in poker is a matter of the player mastering the "market mechanisms" of the game and negotiating the "exchange value" of the hands in a way that redistributes the value at stake in the game at his benefit. Depending on his level of skill, the player

will be to some degree able to compensate for an eventual lack of strong hands. Just like the capitalist in the analysis by Marx, the skilled Draw poker player is able to extract more value from the sphere of exchange than he puts into it. What we see in poker at this stage is a simulation of the laws of the market systematically redistributing value in a way not necessarily corresponding to the use value being fed into the market.

Obviously, there is a crucial difference between poker and real-life capitalism. In capitalism, the roles of worker and capitalist are predefined by the ownership of the means of production. This means that the individual's position in relation to the market is structurally determined and not easily changed. It is a matter of class. One may of course quite easily move from being a capitalist to being a worker, but mobility in the other direction is more difficult. In poker, the roles relative to the game are not predefined. The distribution of roles and the struggle for position is rather an element in the playing of the game itself, and mobility is not only possible but highly frequent in the play world of the game. Position in the game is not a matter of class but purely a matter of skill. Of course, players must be able to put up the stake needed to play the game. However, a large stake is no guarantee of success in poker, and even players able to raise only a small amount for the stake still have a fair chance of prospering in the game. We shall be returning to the role of class and class struggle in the next chapter.

The nineteenth century was an era of industrialization that transformed the United States from an agricultural economy to the largest and most competitive industrial nation in the world. As the American frontier moved westward, more and more areas of the continent were subsumed by an industrial capitalist mode of production. And as civilization and development progressed, the West became less and less Wild. The construction of the railroad system is an illustrative example of this historical development. The first mechanized passenger trains were put into operation in the 1830s and a climax in the history of the American railroads was reached in 1869 when the first transcontinental railroad was completed.

Boltanski and Chiapello suggests that the particular "spirit of capitalism" at the end of the nineteenth century identifies economic progress with the achievements of the individual person as bourgeois entrepreneur: "The image of the entrepreneur, the captain of industry, the conquistador, encapsulates the heroic elements of the portrait, stressing gambles, speculation, risk, innovation." But these heroic elements are at the same time combined with more novel economic propensities such as "avarice or parsimony, the spirit of saving, a tendency to rationalize daily

life in all its aspects, development of capacities for book-keeping, calculation, prediction."[16]

As this contradictory portrait of the bourgeois entrepreneur illustrates, the century marked a transformation from an expansionist phase of capitalism, as we have described previously, to an industrial phase of capitalism. In the expansionist phase, the major source of value was the appropriation of hitherto unexploited natural resources. In the industrial phase, value is no longer so much appropriated from the external environment as it is produced within the system of capitalism itself. The industrial phase marks the completion of a process of capitalization whereby, in the above words of Hardt and Negri, *the outside is internalized.* The United States was no longer a territory divided between an "inside" and an "outside" of capitalism but rather a total system in which the "outside" had been "internalized." The construction of the transcontinental railroad together with a wide range of other moments of "civilization," including the constitution of the United States as a unified nation, contributed to the development of a more encompassing system of capitalism and a more predictable, regulated, calculable, and efficient market for the exchange and distribution of value in society. In Draw poker, we find a simulation of these market mechanisms for exchange and distribution of value.

POKER IN THE FACTORY SOCIETY

The form of poker known at Stud poker was invented in the second half of the nineteenth century.[17] After World War I, the popularity of Draw poker began to fade, while Stud poker and Seven-Card Stud in particular took the place as the most popular form of poker in America.[18]

In Draw poker, players hold all their cards in their hand, concealed from the other players. Stud differs from Draw in that the players' hands consist of cards only the player can see ("hole cards") and cards visible to all players. The first and most primitive form of Stud poker is Five-Card Stud. In this version, players are initially dealt one hole card and one card faceup. Based on these two cards, the players complete the first interval of betting. Then players who haven't folded are dealt an additional three cards faceup to complete the full hand and there is a second betting interval ending in a showdown. At the turn of the twentieth century, the more advanced form of Seven-Card Stud became popular.[19] In this version, players are dealt an initial two hole cards facedown and one upcard after which a betting interval follows. Then remaining players are dealt a fourth, fifth,

and sixth card faceup, each followed by a betting interval and eventually a seventh card facedown after which the last interval of betting follows and ends in a showdown. At showdown, the player able to form the strongest five-card poker hand out of his seven cards takes down the pot.

In Seven-Card Stud, there are altogether five betting rounds compared to only two rounds in Draw and Five-Card Stud. This brings the mathematical dimension of the game to the fore. At every betting interval, the skilled Seven-Card Stud player is able to make precise calculations of her own and opponents' probabilities of improving their hand. These calculations take into account not only the cards in the player's own hand but also all the cards in opponents' hands visible on the board. Since cards are taken off the board as players fold their hand, it is crucial to take into account not only the cards currently visible but also the cards "mucked" in earlier stages of the hand. In a game of five or six players, a substantial share of the cards often becomes visible at some time during the course of the hand, allowing players with the capacity for attention, memory, and probability theory to gain a substantial edge.

The large number of betting intervals in Seven-Card Stud also allows for very precise logical deductions regarding the likely nature of opponents' concealed hole cards. First, cards visible on the board can be logically excluded from opponents' hands. Second, the development of an opponent's betting action during five rounds of betting gives the skilled player rich information for the "reading" of the opponent's hand.

Five-Card Stud only plays well with no-limit betting.[20] Seven-Card Stud, however, also plays well with a fixed limit on the betting at each round and it is often played in this form. The betting structure has deep implications for the game and a fixed-limit game again puts even more emphasis on the mathematical side of poker as it becomes more difficult to bluff opponents out of a pot. Furthermore, calculations of the potential costs and gains of staying in a pot over the course of future betting rounds can be calculated with a higher degree of certainty in fixed-limit compared to no-limit.

In Draw poker, all the information players have about an opponent's hand is mediated through the opponent. This goes for the number of cards drawn, the betting action, and possible physical tells. This means that all information is at the same time subject to possible deception. A player standing pat (not drawing any cards) may turn out to be bluffing on a worthless hand. A player passively checking instead of betting may be sandbagging a flush. And a player showing despair when looking through

his cards after the draw may have picked up the exact card to complete his straight.

In Stud, and in Seven-Card Stud in particular, information that is more exact is available for the logical and statistical analysis of the game situation. We have already seen how the step from Flat poker to Draw poker made the game more scientific. This is even more the case with the step from Draw to Seven-Card Stud. In Seven-Card Stud, it is possible to infer, with a high degree of certainty from the large amount of exact information, what is not immediately known (opponents' hole cards and cards not yet dealt), thus reducing the element of chance and deception in the game.[21] Hence, Seven-Card Stud and fixed limit in particular is largely a contest of approximating mathematically optimal play.

In the period between 1870, when Draw was fully developed, and the 1920s, when Seven-Card Stud became the most popular form of poker, not only did the form of the game shift but also the venue of playing. From being a game played by cardsharps, gold diggers, and cowboys on the Mississippi riverboats or in the saloons of the western boomtowns, poker came to be more of a social and recreational game played between friends, colleagues, or business associates in the drawing room or in the office after hours.[22] Poker was no longer played at the frontier but rather at the center of capitalist society.

The gradual development of industrial society enters a new phase around the 1920s and 1930s. As the opportunities for the subsumption of new territories under the capitalist mode of production were exhausted, the focus of economic progress shifted toward the optimization of this very mode of production. We see this shift, for instance, in Taylor's development of the principles of scientific management that were most illustratively implemented in the systems of mass production at the Ford factories. From a Marxist perspective, the simple rationale behind Taylorism and Fordism was to enhance the productivity of labor, thus appropriating a larger amount of relative surplus value by increasing the use value (output) of the labor process without increasing the exchange value (salary) proportionally.[23] In order for surplus value to be transformed into profit, however, it needs to be realized; that is, it is not enough just to produce more goods, you need also to be able to sell the goods at the right price in order to make money. Hence, the further development of capitalist society along the lines of industrialism calls for not only an optimization of the process of production but also for a regulation and stimulation of the market where commodities are sold and consumed.

In the analysis of Hardt and Negri, the state comes to play a major role in the regulation and stimulation of the market. Thus, the New Deal of the 1930s signified the emergence of a new phase of capitalism characterized by a more totalizing system of regulation. "The New Deal constituted a real departure from the previous forms of the bourgeois regulation of economic development," and it marked the development of the "trinity that would constitute the modern welfare state: a synthesis of Taylorism in the organization of labor, Fordism in the wage regime, and Keynesianism in the macroeconomic regulation of society."[24] The precondition for economic development in industrial capitalism is predictability, calculability, and stability, and the Keynesian state provided the framework within which the accumulation of profit in Taylorist/Fordist companies could function according to these principles. This regulation of society expanded beyond the boundaries of the U.S. nation-state, among other factors, through the accords of the Bretton Woods agreement that fixed the exchange rates between different national currency systems on the U.S. dollar, thus facilitating stable conditions for international trade.

Boltanski and Chiapello describe a distinct spirit of capitalism between the 1930s and the 1960s that no longer identified the individual entrepreneur as the motor of economic development but rather put emphasis on the organization. In this spirit, the heroic figure is the manager "preoccupied by the desire endlessly to expand the size of the firm he is responsible for, in order to develop mass production, based on economies of scale, product standardization, the rational organization of work, and new techniques for expanding markets (marketing)."[25] Rather than the adventurous and risky exploration of the unknown, the manager incarnates the refinement of a system of control, optimization, and discipline within the standards of an already established order.

And discipline is precisely the crucial term in this phase of capitalism, according to Hardt and Negri:

> The New Deal produced the highest form of *disciplinary* government. . . . [I]n a disciplinary society, the entire society, with all its productive and reproductive articulations, is subsumed under the command of capital and the state, and . . . the society tends, gradually but with unstoppable continuity, to be ruled solely by criteria of capitalist production. *A disciplinary society is thus a factory-society.*[26]

In Seven-Card Stud, more than in other forms of poker, focus is directed at the probabilities given by the actual value of the hand. Since the element

of bluffing is downplayed in favor of stringent deduction and calculation, it becomes less important to make out the psychological constitution of the opponent through a reading of his playing style over the course of several hands. Especially when played with fixed limits, the object of the game is not to build up to an outstanding situation in which the entire profit of the session is made by taking home one single major pot. Instead, the skilled player attempts to play each hand and each individual round of the hand as close to the mathematically optimal as possible, thus gradually grinding out a profit in the long run as less skilled opponents deviate from the "ideal" play.

Another important evolutionary trait of mature industrial capitalism is the emergence of finance as a distinct domain separate from the domain of economics. In modern finance, which emerged as an independent scientific discipline over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, we find the Efficient Market Hypothesis.[27] This hypothesis suggests that even though there might be individual investors who are ignorant, irrational, or even both at the same time, the market as a whole behaves as a fully informed rational actor. One of the implications of this hypothesis, which was first formulated in Markowitz's[28] and Sharpe's[29] works on portfolio theory, is that investment strategy should not be based on predictions of the future development of individual stocks and other securities in the market. Since the efficient market has already taken into account all available and relevant information about the future of the market, any predictable development has already been incorporated into the current prices in the market. In other words, investors should refrain from trying to beat the market. In an efficient market, such attempts amount to nothing other than sheer gambling. We see here how dispositions in the financial markets may be carried out in disregard of the economic reality of the underlying companies, that is, the separation of finance from economics.

Instead of trying to pick individual stocks, modern finance prescribes that investors shift perspective to the aggregate level of their portfolio. In the efficient market, the relation between the riskiness of a stock and the size of possible rewards is already incorporated into the price. However, investors may optimize the relation between risk and reward through the composition of a diversified portfolio, where the risks of individual stocks are offset by being combined with other stocks that have dissimilar risk structures. This means that the optimal portfolio may be composed solely on the basis of financial data, that is, the past history of price fluctuations of different stocks related to the fluctuations of the market as a whole. In

practice, this leads to the construction of index funds, where risk and re-
ward are optimized through the composition of a portfolio that emulates
the markets as a whole.

The modern portfolio manager, who adheres to the prescriptions of
modern finance, has much in common with the disciplined Stud player.
Just as the modern portfolio manager takes the aggregate perspective of
the portfolio as opposed to the singular perspective of the individual stock,
the stud player must remain constantly focused on the aggregate perspec-
tive of the long run rather than the random outcomes of the individual
hand. This is, of course, true of any kind of poker, but the fixed-limit bet-
ting structure of Seven-Card Stud makes the game even more suited for
probabilistic calculations.

In Neumann and Morgenstern's seminal work on game theory from
1944, the hypothesis is advanced that it is in principle possible to calculate
the optimal move for any situation in a poker game even though the oppo-
nent's cards are not known. The work even includes the mathematical
proof for the rationality of bluffing.[30] As we have already seen, Neumann
and Morgenstern base their argument on the analysis of an extremely sim-
plified version of poker, and it is doubtful to what extent their theory of
poker can be applied to the forms of poker actually played. However, the
kind of poker most suited for game-theoretical modeling is arguably
Seven-Card Stud given the calculative nature of the game.

The mini-max strategy applied by game theory assumes perfect ratio-
nality and strategic insight on the part of the opponent. In Draw as well as
in Hold 'Em, overestimating your opponent can be almost as fatal as un-
derestimating her. This is much less the case in Seven-Card Stud. The
fixed-limit betting structure and the relatively large number of exposed
cards make it feasible to assume optimal play by the opponent. Even if the
opponent actually plays suboptimally, this will just function to decrease her
chances of winning. We might say that the Seven-Card Stud player ap-
proaches the game as if it is an "efficient market." The game is less about
targeting individual weak opponents than about playing the cards and the
game mathematically optimally.

The way profit is gradually ground out in a game of fixed-limit Seven-
Card Stud through the approximation to a mathematically and logically
defined ideal of optimal play simulates the way surplus value is gradually
extorted from the disciplined process of production and consumption in
advanced industrial capitalism, or the way that an index fund provides a
steady, predictable, and allegedly risk-free dividend on the initial invest-

ment. In a fashion similar to the Fordist organization of the factory, the Keynesian regulation of the macroeconomy, and the market efficiency of modern finance, all of which provide transparency and predictability in the production, marketability, and redistribution of value in industrial capitalism, the great amount of information and the fixed-limit betting structure provide transparency and predictability in Seven-Card Stud.

FROM STUD TO HOLD 'EM

> Limit poker is a science, but no-limit is an art. In limit, you are shooting at a target. In no-limit, the target comes alive and shoots back at you.[31]

The most popular form of poker today is No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em. Like many other things in the history of poker, the origins of Hold 'Em are somewhat hazy. This particular variant of the game is thought to have emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in an area around Dallas.[32] From here, the game spread throughout the southern United States after World War II. In the late 1960s, the game was introduced in Las Vegas by a group of Texas gamblers. When the World Series of Poker was founded at the Binion's Horseshoe Casino in 1970, No-limit Texas Hold 'Em was adopted for the main event. Since then, the popularity of Texas Hold 'Em has been growing steadily. In the early 1980s, the game was introduced in Europe.[33]

In the years just after 2000, a virtual poker boom was brought about by two technological innovations: Internet poker and televised poker tournaments.[34] The excitement of watching superstar poker players gamble for millions combined with the easy accessibility of Internet gambling created an explosive boost in the popularity of poker in general and of No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em in particular, with annual turnovers being counted in billions of dollars. Internet poker rooms do offer a variety of poker games, but by far the most heavily promoted form of poker is No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em, and even though the World Series of Poker hosts championships in a wide range of games, the No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em game is still the undisputed main event. Texas Hold 'Em has long since outgrown Stud as the most popular form of poker in the United States as well as the rest of the world.[35]

There are a number of structural differences between Stud and Hold 'Em. We shall be noting here the two most crucial ones: First, in Hold 'Em face-up cards are dealt as community cards and not as individual cards as

they are in Stud. In Hold 'Em each player is dealt two hole cards facedown and then five community cards on four consecutive betting rounds. Second, Stud normally plays with a fixed-limit betting structure, whereas Hold 'Em plays either with fixed-limit or with no-limit betting. By far the most popular and widespread form of Hold 'Em is no-limit.

The most obvious consequence of upcards being dealt as community cards in Hold 'Em is that the amount of exact information available to players is generally greater in Stud than in Hold 'Em. In a seven-handed game of Seven-Card Stud, seven cards are visible on the board even before the first round of betting begins. Furthermore, depending on the number of players staying in the pot, the number of upcards may increase quickly. In Hold 'Em players get to see a maximum of only five cards plus their own hole cards. This means that in Stud a player will have more exact knowledge about which cards he can expect to be dealt and which cards opponents may have since he can eliminate a significant number of cards that have already been dealt. Taken separately, this aspect emphasizes the mathematical and logical element in Stud, lending an edge to players that have the skills to view the board as a whole and remember which cards have been discarded and which cards are still live. In Hold 'Em, this kind of reasoning by sheer elimination is far simpler since players have only to be aware of the few cards currently on the board.

Another consequence of the structural difference between Stud and Hold 'Em is that in Stud, differences between players' hands are partly visible, whereas they are invisible in Hold 'Em. This is obvious from the perspective of a nonparticipating spectator. Given that the spectator has no access to hole-cams recording player's downcards, watching a game of Hold 'Em he will be seeing a number of players each holding two concealed cards and sharing the same community cards. But even to individual Hold 'Em players, who know their own hole cards, there are no visible differences between their own hand and opponents' hands, since they can only speculate about that part of the opponent's hand which differs from their own, the hole cards. In Stud, on the contrary, differences between players' hands become visible when the door card (the first upcard dealt before the first round of betting) is dealt, and these differences develop as further upcards follow. In Stud, the strength of a hand is partially revealed as it develops with upcards being dealt. Insofar as the strength of the hand is still contingent on the concealed hole cards, the strength of the hand is, of course, never entirely revealed. However, when compared to Hold 'Em, Stud players have much more exact knowledge on which to base their esti-

mation of the strength of an opponent's hand and thus the relative strength of their own hand. In Hold 'Em, players are, to a much greater extent, forced to rely on information mediated through the opponent and hence subject to possible deception, when estimating the relative strength of their hand.

A third consequence of the structural difference between Stud and Hold 'Em is that in Stud, hands develop independently as further upcards are dealt, whereas in Hold 'Em there is greater codependence in the development of hands as upcards are shared. Since hands develop codependently and differ only by two cards, the difference between the best and the second-best hand is typically smaller and more subtle in Hold 'Em than in Stud.

But the most crucial difference between Stud and Hold 'Em follows from the difference between fixed-limit (also referred to as limit) and no-limit betting. The difference between limit and no-limit is not only quantitative, with bigger pots being played in no-limit than in limit given equal blind sizes. When betting restrictions are lifted and every player has the option of going all-in with his entire stack of chips at every betting round, the entire mathematical infrastructure of the game is upset and the nature of the game is transformed qualitatively.

In a fixed-limit game, the betting and the development of a pot proceed in a more or less linear fashion. This means that even in the early stages of a hand, the potential costs of staying in the pot through to showdown and the potential win at showdown may be prognosticated with a certain degree of certainty. By comparing these figures with the statistical odds of completing different hands, a player may mathematically calculate with a reasonable amount of certainty whether it is profitable to play a hand or not.[36] In a no-limit game, this kind of calculation is upset by the possibility of somebody, either the opponent or the player herself, going all-in with her entire stack of chips. Hence, the development of a pot becomes less predictable, more fluctuating, and more dependent on the opponent's individual style, temper, character, and, most importantly, perception of the game.

In no-limit, a much wider range of starting hands is potentially playable and the question of how to play a given hand is much more open. Generally, it is more difficult to point to the "correct" way of playing a hand in no-limit than in limit. In no-limit, the range of "correct" plays will generally be much wider than in limit, and it will depend on a more complex set of factors. The betting structure invites the player to take greater chances

and go for draws less likely to succeed, since the prospect of going all-in with a completed hand may justify the amount invested in calling a bet to get more cards on the turn and river.

Finally, bluffing plays a much different role in no-limit poker. Brunson states: "In Limit play, you must play solid hands because it's almost impossible to run anybody out of a pot. But, in No-Limit play, you can make your opponent(s) lay down a hand by using your position and your money."[37] This is partly due to the fact that the unlimited betting structure gives you the option of challenging an opponent for a larger part or even all of his money, thus accentuating the role of bluffing in no-limit poker. In limit poker you have to play your cards to their exact value, with occasional bluffs to keep your opponent from reading you too well, but in no-limit you yourself will be more likely to bluff more often and you will constantly be faced with the possibility of other players bluffing. The same applies to slow-playing strong hands in order to keep opponents contributing to a pot you are expecting to win, which is also more common in no-limit.

Summarizing these consequences, we can say, on the one hand, that Hold 'Em implies a revival of some of the features of Draw poker. Like Draw, Hold 'Em offers a smaller amount of exact knowledge than Stud, which forces players to rely to a greater extent on information mediated through opponents' actions. In that sense, Stud is a more straightforward game where you bet with a strong hand taking into account the cards on the board, discarded upcards, and the odds of your hand improving on later streets. Furthermore, during the course of a hand players will get more and more exact knowledge about where they stand in relation to their opponents. In Hold 'Em as in Draw, the actual strength of a hand is invisible throughout the hand and not revealed until showdown, which makes bluffing and other kinds of deception an ever present possibility and a more important part of the game than in Stud. In Hold 'Em as in Draw, the psychological aspect of the game comes more to the fore since a move is decided in those parts of the game that are not immediately visible, and most of a player's information about what is going on is mediated through his opponent, constantly actualizing the question of how to understand and interpret their actions.

On the other hand, Hold 'Em is in some respects still closer to Stud than to Draw. In Draw, it is all of the opponent's hand that is principally unknown, whereas in Hold 'Em, it is only the two hole cards. This means that the number of different hands an opponent could be holding is far smaller in Hold 'Em than in Draw. Furthermore, the open community cards give

the Hold 'Em player a greater amount of exact knowledge to work with when trying to deduce an opponent's hand. The greater number of betting rounds in Hold 'Em—four compared to two in Draw—also gives players more information on which to base their reading of the opponent.

Overall Hold 'Em seems to be a hybrid of Stud and Draw, preserving the element of mathematical and logical calculation from Stud but reviving the element of bluffing, deception, and psychological reading from Draw. This may serve as a more elaborate explanation behind the statement made by Johnny Moss, cited at the beginning of this chapter: "Hold'Em is to Stud and Draw what chess is to checkers." In the words of another poker legend, Doyle Brunson, the same point is expressed in his characteristization of the game: "Hold'em has more variety to it than any other form of Poker. And more complexity. It has something for everybody . . . the mathematicians and psychologists . . . the 'loose-gooses' and the 'hard-rocks.'" Brunson also refers to No-limit Texas Hold 'Em as "the Cadillac of poker games."[38]

POSTINDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

We have now reached the final stage of our historical tour de force through the coevolution of poker and capitalism. The chapter has, of course, been building up to the argument that the shift from Stud to No-limit Texas Hold 'Em is in fact the simulation of a comparable paradigm shift in capitalism from industrialism to the kind of capitalism characterizing contemporary society. This relation between Texas Hold 'Em and contemporary capitalism is, however, worth exploring in more detail than is possible within the frame of the current chapter. In the following, we shall indeed complete the historical analysis of poker by indicating the similarities between Texas Hold 'Em and postindustrial capitalism. These indications should be read as a preview of the themes to be unfolded in the next chapter, rather than as completed arguments in themselves.

The 1970s, when No-limit Texas Hold 'Em started gaining popularity, was in a number of ways a time of great change in the development of capitalism. It was a time marked by crisis and rupture.[39] Indeed, the phenomenon of crisis was nothing new in the history of capitalism. What seemed to happen at the time, however, was that instead of crisis marking the transition into a distinctly new phase of capitalism, crisis became in itself the new modus vivendi of capitalism. This is true for capitalism from the 1970s and onward to the present. Symptomatically, the paradigm shift in capitalism happening around the 1970s is often conceptualized not by coining

new phrases but rather by adding the prefix "post-" to already existing "-isms." Prominent examples are "postindustrialism,"[40] "post-Fordism,"[41] and the more general term "postmodernism."[42] Here we shall be pointing to two dimensions of this paradigm shift that are particularly relevant to our analysis of poker: *virtualization of money* and *immaterialization of labor.*

The breakdown of the Bretton Woods system in 1972, which had hitherto served to stabilize the global network of currencies, is a key event in the transformation from industrial to postindustrial capitalism. The event marks the loss of a universal standard of value. The value of goods and services may still be measured against a monetary price in the market, but the medium of this measurement, money, is no longer a fixed structure. As currencies begin to float freely, the money form itself becomes subject to the fluctuations of the market. Money is no longer just form but also at the same time content of the market.

This is reflected in an exponential growth in the trading volume of financial markets. Fluctuations in these markets are not solely determined by events in the external production economy, where actual goods are produced and traded. On the contrary, dynamisms have emerged whereby these markets have become highly susceptible to endogenous events within the financial markets themselves, that is, fluctuations in collective expectations of the future development of currency rates, stock prices, real estate prices, and so on. This trend has been summarized as a "de-substantialisation of value" whereby the creation and distribution of value become decoupled from substantial events and objects outside the cycles of value themselves.[43] We can also refer to this trend as a virtualization of money, insofar as the very circulation of money itself becomes an independent force in the determination of real events. The circulation of money is perhaps sometimes even the primary force in driving the markets rather than the actual course of events outside of the financial markets.

As we have seen in the previous section, the way to play a hand in No-limit Texas Hold 'Em is less straightforwardly determined by the actual content of the hand than in Stud. In Hold 'Em position and the profiles of opponents are more important, and the Hold 'Em player has a wider arsenal of moves at his disposal to drive opponents out of a pot before showdown. In this respect, the move from Stud to Hold 'Em signifies a kind of "decoupling" of the betting action from the actual card holdings. This means that we find in Hold 'Em a system for the distribution of value that is less determined by "real events," that is, the actual deal of the cards, than by the reading, creation, and manipulation of expectations and imagina-

tions among the players, that is, by the betting action. In ideal-typical terms, we can state the following difference between Stud and Hold 'Em: In Stud, betting should by and large be a *representation* of the value of the hand and the successful player is he who is able to recognize with the greatest degree of accuracy the "true" value of his hand and bet accordingly. In Hold 'Em, on the contrary, betting is rather a *simulation* of the value of the hand, so the betting action constitutes a virtual reality, capable of determining the outcome of the hand semiautonomously from the actual card holdings.

This difference between "representation" and "simulation" corresponds to the difference between industrial capitalism, where financial markets function as representations of value within the sphere of the productive economy, and postindustrial capitalism, where financial markets tend to constitute a reality of their own decoupled from the sphere of the productive economy.

The crisis leading up to the paradigm shift in capitalism in the 1970s was not only a financial or monetary crisis but also a crisis in the very organization of labor. The Taylorist and Fordist organization of labor in industrial capitalism had created hitherto unseen wealth and freedom in the middle and working classes of the developed countries. Instead of satisfaction and gratitude with the existing organization of labor, the new wealth and freedom created, however, a desire for more freedom, and dissatisfaction with the disciplinary work regime of industrial capitalism. This dissatisfaction manifested itself in the mass movement of social protest and cultural experimentation of the 1960s. Freedom was no longer just something to be enjoyed when "free" from work. Work in itself should be an experience of pleasure, creativity, and freedom. As Hardt and Negri point out, the dissatisfaction had simultaneously a destructive and a productive side:

> The mass refusal of the disciplinary regime, which took a variety of forms, was not only a negative expression but also a moment of creation, what Nietzsche calls a transvaluation of values. The various forms of social contestation and experimentation all centered on a refusal to value the kind of fixed program of material production typical of the disciplinary regime, its mass factories, and its nuclear family structure. The movements valued instead a more flexible dynamic of creativity and what might be considered more *immaterial* forms of production.[44]

The immaterialization of labor constitutes a paradigm shift in the notion of value creation. In the age of industrial capitalism, value is created in the

standardized mass production of commodities for the satisfaction of predictable, static, and homogeneous needs in the consumer market. The goal of management is thus to eliminate all factors of unpredictability and streamline employees toward conformity to a predefined ideal. In the age of postindustrial capitalism, value is created in the transgression and transformation of existing norms, standards, and ideals. And the challenge of management becomes to include spontaneity and unpredictability in the process of production and facilitate employees' creative and innovative deviations from predefined ideals.

We see also this dimension of the paradigm shift from industrial to postindustrial simulated in the shift from Stud to No-limit Hold 'Em. In order to be a good Hold 'Em player it is not enough to be able to conform to mathematical standards of play. Texas Hold 'Em is indeed about knowing the standards of play but more importantly also knowing when and how to deviate from these standards. We have already seen that there is a constant pressure on professional Hold 'Em players to develop, improve, and innovate in order to be one step ahead of the current state of the level at which they are playing. This is both the challenge and the attraction of the game.

Just as there is in the regime of mass production a tendency for the worker to be transformed into an appendage[45] of the machine, the playing of fixed-limit Seven-Card Stud has also the tendency of degenerating into the automatic execution of mathematical algorithms. And in the same way that monotonous assembly line work is today regarded as one of the lowest and least attractive forms of work, measured by the contemporary demands for work to be "self-fulfilling," to be "intellectually rewarding," and to "redeem the creative potential of the employee," many No-limit poker players look at limit poker with a certain degree of disdain and refer to it as "an unimaginative, mechanical game" and as "a disciplined job."[46] Poker legend Barry Greenstein explains how economic circumstances once forced him to take up limit poker, and he refers to the experience in these terms: "To me, it was like watching paint dry. I had to play twelve hours a day, seven days a week, just to make ends meet."[47] Another poker legend, Jack Straus, describes the game like this: "Anybody who wants to work out the mathematics can be a limit player and chisel out an existence. You just have to condition yourself to sit there and wait."[48] Is this not an echo of the critique of work organization in industrial capitalism that eventually led to the transformation into post-Fordist organization of work in postindustrial capitalism?

ELEVEN ♠
        ♣
        ♥
    ♦   Poetry of Money

In the American dream, society is classless, anyone can play; it is the
same with poker.[1]

It is common to think that gamblers gamble in order to win money. This is
true in the sense that if there were no opportunity to win money, there would
be no fun in gambling. However, the inclination to gamble cannot be re-
duced to the desire to win money. We may again quote Nick "The Greek"
Dandalos: "The next best thing to gambling and winning is gambling and
losing."[2] This amounts to a strange paradox in the relation between money
and gambling, which extends to the relation between money and poker. On
the one hand, money is a necessary component of gambling. Gambling with-
out money is boring and hardly even qualifies as gambling. On the other
hand, the gambling is not primarily about winning money. When losing
gamblers keep coming back to the game, it is not because they are stupid. It
is because gambling is somehow fun, even when you are not winning money.

In order to understand this paradox, we need to expand our under-
standing of money. When a gambler engages in a gambling game, he does
not just put money at stake as a quantitative representation of value. In
gambling, the very meaning and functioning of money are questioned.
The relationship between money, economy, and gambling may be com-
pared to the relationship between language, prose, and poetry. In prose,
the functioning of language is more or less taken for granted, and language
is used as a medium for conveying meaning, for instance, stating a fact or
telling a story. In (good) poetry, however, there is a wondering and probing
into the very character of language. Rhythm and rhyming make us aware

of language as an independent entity with material properties; verbal ambiguity questions the very signifying function of language; and so on. Similarly, in our use of money in "ordinary" economy we take for granted its function as neutral medium of exchange, measure, and store of value. In gambling, however, money enters a different kind of circulation whereby the very functioning of money is put into question. Playing with money means experimenting with money, revealing properties not otherwise immediately visible. In this sense, gambling may be viewed as a kind of "poetry of money." Gambling offers the opportunity to play with money in the same way that poetry offers the opportunity to play with words.

In Žižek's words, "Poetry . . . takes place within language, but twists and turns it against itself, thus making it tell the truth."[3] Truth in poetry is not the kind of truth found in propositions about a factual state of affairs in the world. It is perhaps rather a kind of truth about language itself. Along similar lines, we might claim that there is a certain kind of truth about money that reveals itself in gambling.

In gambling, money enters a form of circulation that is distinct from the way it circulates in the "ordinary" economy.[4] As we know from the Marxist analysis of the transformation of money into capital, the properties of money are contingent upon the form of circulation in which they appear. The same applies to money in gambling. When money is introduced into the gambling game, the very properties of money are transformed. This extends to poker in general and Texas Hold 'Em in particular. What is particular about Texas Hold 'Em as a gambling game is that it offers the opportunity to play with money in a way that is both distinctively different from the circulation of money in the "ordinary" economy, yet at the same time very similar to the "ordinary" economy. Texas Hold 'Em is an eminent parodic simulation of the circulation of money in contemporary capitalism. The current chapter thus provides an analysis of the circulation of money in contemporary postindustrial capitalism and the circulation of money in Texas Hold 'Em. The analysis starts by exploring the philosophical dimension of the transformation from industrial to postindustrial capitalism that was already touched upon in the previous chapter.

VALUE AND MONEY IN INDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

By virtue of being value, it [capital] has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at the least lays golden eggs.[5]

Marx is the classical starting point for an account of the production and distribution of value in industrial capitalism. The defining characteristic of the capitalist mode of production is that the productive processing of nature no longer takes place in a context controlled and owned by the productive individual. Instead, labor power is lifted out of this context and offered on the market as commodity.[6] The pricing of labor in the market takes place in relative autonomy from the real value of labor. This relative autonomy constitutes the focal point of the capitalist exploitation of labor. Labor is valued at an exchange value below its use value, thus enabling profit as the extraction of surplus value. Value, originally created through labor, is redistributed in favor of the capitalist and at the expense of the worker.

In order to prepare for the comparison with poker, we shall reformulate the Marxist theory of capitalism in terms of Žižek's distinction between the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. With Žižek, the capitalization of labor can be described as a form of symbolization of the real. This operation is captured in the Lacanian phrase: "The letter kills."[7] The symbol substitutes the real and blocks our immediate access to the undifferentiated being of the world. When labor is priced as exchange value, this is an operation of symbolization substituting the immediate quality of labor as productive use value. Symbolic exchange value "kills" real use value.

Production of value takes place in the order of the real where labor processes nature. The original value is then redistributed in the symbolic order, where it is whirled into the circulation of money and commodities with the well-known form M-C-M.[8]

A necessary precondition for the operation of symbolization, in which labor is priced as commodity, is the money form. Only through money as universal measure of value is it possible to lift labor out of its immediate context and submit it to the abstract comparison with other commodities across time and space. Marx describes the evolution of money as a transformation whereby a certain commodity (gold and to some extent silver) is gradually abstracted and lifted out of the ordinary circulation of commodities and comes to function as universal equivalent for all other commodities. At the same time, money is both commodity itself by being linked to gold and also the very form enabling the abstract valuation of all other commodities.[9] This transformation has also been described as a sublimation of gold.[10]

In the form of universal equivalent for the valuation of commodities, money belongs to the third leg of the Lacanian trinity: that is, the imagi-
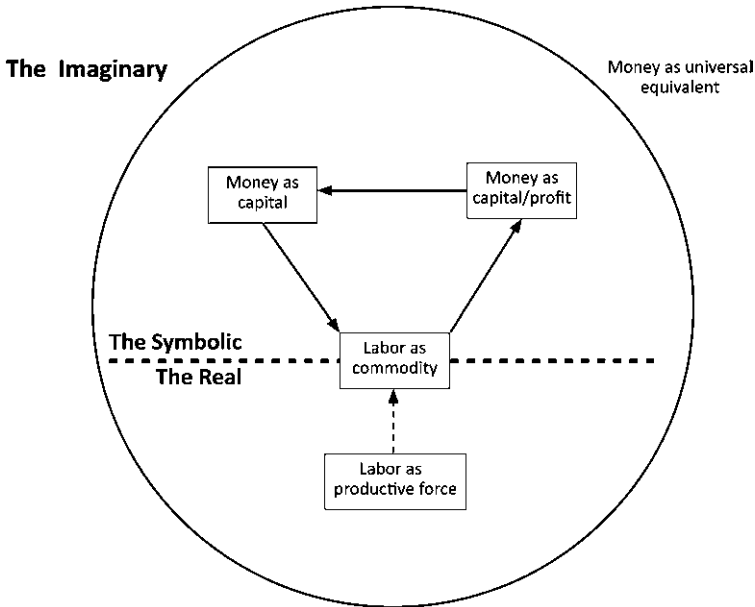
Fig. 9. Three ontological orders of industrial capitalism

nary order.[11] Money is the sublime object stabilizing the relation between the real and the symbolic. From Marx we know that the opposition between labor and capital is loaded with an insoluble antagonism in the same way that the split between the real and the symbolic in Žižek is traumatic. The money form, however, enables a coverup of this antagonism, this trauma. In the valuation of the commodity as exchange value, the real value of the commodity as materialized labor is repressed as a "secret, hidden under the apparent movements in the relative values of commodities."[12] In this way, the capitalist mode of production is able to function in spite of its inherent antagonisms. Money incarnates a phantasm that labor may in one and the same move be priced as both productive force and as commodity, that is, that use value and exchange value may be contained by one and the same symbolic expression. Hence, money incarnates exactly the general function of ideology that we have already stated with Žižek: "'Ideology' is the 'self-evident' surface structure whose function is to conceal the underlying 'unbalanced,' 'uncanny' structure."[13]

Production and distribution of value in capitalism are summarized in figure 9. We see how actual value is created by labor as productive force in

the order of the real, only to become redistributed through the circulation of commodities and capital in the symbolic order. Money as universal equivalent is the form enabling the subsumption of the real under the symbolic. Money as form constitutes the imaginary order.

FROM INDUSTRIAL TO POSTINDUSTRIAL CAPITALISM

> Speculation is no longer surplus-value; it is the ecstasy of value, without reference to production or its real condition.[14]

When Marx is speaking of capitalism, he is thinking of industrial capitalism as it is unfolding in his own time. In this paradigm of capitalism, value is produced by sweating workers in Manchester textile factories and then exploited by old men in top hat and cigar. In the West at least, this is not how capitalism looks anymore, and a development of Marx's analysis is necessary in order for it to function on contemporary affairs. With Žižek, the movement from industrial capitalism to the postindustrial capitalism of today can be described as a fragmentation of the imaginary order.

In Marx, money functions as universal equivalent through the link to gold under the gold standard. Marx's theoretical account corresponds to the actual money system in effect in his own time. This system was created when the Bank of England started issuing paper money in the nineteenth century that was backed by a gold standard by being directly convertible to gold.[15] As other nations adopted the same system, different currencies became relatively synchronized through their reference to gold as a common external point of reference.

Because of great fluctuations in the currency markets in the period between World War I and World War II, the Western economies abandoned the direct gold standard. In 1944, just before the end of World War II, they entered into the interstate Bretton Woods agreement through which the currency of every nation is committed to a certain fixed rate relative to the U.S. dollar.[16] The U.S. dollar remained the only currency still directly convertible to gold. As result of the Bretton Woods agreement, the U.S. dollar now functioned as "surrogate" for the gold standard, and the function of money was guaranteed rather by the strength of the American economy than by the intrinsic value of gold.[17]

In 1971, President Nixon (himself an avid and skilled Stud poker player)[18] stopped the direct convertibility of U.S. dollars to gold and unilaterally abandoned the Bretton Woods system, in effect causing the sys-

tem to collapse in 1972. This event, subsequently dubbed "The Nixon Shock," was a culmination of a crisis that had emerged within the Bretton Woods system. Since 1958, a growing deficit in the U.S. balance of payments had been gradually eroding international confidence in the dollar and its continued convertibility into gold. Consequently, open world market prices of gold were exceeding those offered through the convertibility of U.S. dollars, thus compounding the risk of a "run on gold." Rather than resolving this crisis through the establishment of a new system, the Nixon Shock simply collapsed the Bretton Woods system with nothing other than the forces of an unregulated market to take its place.

This is how the current money system evolved in which currencies float freely without being linked to gold or any other external point of reference. In combination with growing globalization of the economy—with Western companies outsourcing production to low-cost regions in China and Southeast Asia, with products being sold globally and with technological developments enabling a global financial market—the collapse of Bretton Woods instituted new conditions for the circulation of commodities and capital.[19]

In the postindustrial, globalized, post–Bretton Woods capitalism, exchange of capital and commodities takes place across several different currency regions and so across several different monetary systems. Production, consumption, and financing are dispersed, and today it is far from unusual for a commodity to be produced, for instance, in China and consumed in the United States, while the whole operation is financed from Germany. This dispersion installs a particular vulnerability in the capitalist system for accumulation of surplus value. Fluctuations in the interrelationship between different currencies and money markets can influence the extraction of surplus value, and an otherwise certain profit may risk being absorbed by a rise in the currency rate in the country producing the commodity, a decline in the currency rate of the markets buying the commodity, or a rise in the interest rate of the loans financing the production.

As illustrated in figure 9, the circulation of commodities and capital in industrial capitalism takes place within the same money form, that is, within the same imaginary order integrated by money's reference to gold. As long as pricing and exchange of capital and commodities take place within one and the same monetary system, the only condition for profit to be generated is for the exchange value of labor to be set lower than its use value. With Žižek, we can say that industrial capitalism is backed by an imaginary big Other.

In postindustrial globalized capitalism there is no all-inclusive big Other but rather a number of "little big Others" constantly moving in relation to each other. This fragmentation of the imaginary order adds yet another dimension to the distribution of value in society. The money form is no longer just a neutral medium for the exchange of capital and commodities. Instead, the fluctuations between different money markets constitute a new dimension for redistribution of value in society.

The most marked symptom of the fragmentation of the imaginary order in the transition from industrial to postindustrial capitalism is the emergence and explosive growth in the market for so-called financial derivatives such as futures, options, swaps, and so on.[20] Derivatives are a future contract giving one party the option or obligation to trade a given currency or other financial asset with another party at a set price at some specified time in the future. Financial derivatives counterbalance insecurity in the financial markets by allowing companies to hedge against possible fluctuations in the money market. From being virtually nonexisting in the early 1970s, the market for financial derivatives trading has grown dramatically, with a staggering $583 trillion in outstanding amounts by 2010.[21]

The evolution of derivatives is an expression of the transformation of money's imaginary function in postindustrial capitalism. Stability in the money form is no longer secured by politically regulated interstate agreements imposed on the money market from the outside. If possible at all, it has to be provided from within the system. Here is how Bryan and Rafferty account for the paradigm shift in the money form:

> It is in the context of this rather different monetary system, where money cannot be explained by reference to the state—where volatile shifts in exchange rates are inexplicable and beyond state regulatory capacity—that derivatives, particularly interest-rate and cross-currency interest-rate swaps, have come to the fore. Derivatives provide what nation-state fiat money could not provide on a global scale: they secure some degree of guarantee on the relative values of different monetary units.[22]

It has been argued that derivatives constitute an entirely new form of money.[23] Instead of money being grounded in an asymmetrical relation between the market and the state, money is now regulated in symmetrical relations between different actors within the market. Trust in money is based on the imagination of a network of mutual insurance, dispersing the damaging effects of fluctuations in the money market over a great number of

actors, and minimizing the effects on the individual actor. The imaginary function of the state as the big Other guaranteeing convertibility of money is substituted for an image of a collective of little big Others counterbalancing each other.[24]

The market-stabilizing effects of hedging by means of derivatives are, however, only one side of the coin. The money markets are not just direct reflections of exogenous events such as droughts, strikes, new discoveries of natural resources, or other occurrences that have an impact on the economic activity in a particular region or a particular branch of business. Actors in the market not only act on such occurrences but also on their expectations of other relevant actors' actions and on other actors' expectations of other actors' actions and so on ad infinitum. This gives the money market its own endogenous and almost hysteric dynamic, more or less uncoupled from the external world.[25]

Derivatives not only facilitate insurance from risks through hedging. In themselves, derivatives also contribute paradoxically to the creation of the very same risks from which they purport to provide insurance.[26] Derivatives trading creates a network of interconnections between different actors and different assets in the market. The implications of an individual event such as the crash of a given company or the price fall of a given commodity may thus spread with almost simultaneous effects to many other parts of the market.[27] Since ownership of derivatives does not entail ownership of the underlying assets, derivatives provide opportunity for great leverage. With a relatively low investment, it is possible to assume a relatively high risk. This makes derivatives particularly suited for speculation. It also means, however, that the effects of a local crisis may spread not only linearly but even exponentially in the market, multiplying the damaging effects of the crisis. Great leverage also enables big actors in the market to undertake transactions of such magnitude that they can steer the money market in a certain direction by way of their own transactions, thus being able to profit from self-generated effects in the market. Given the size of the market for financial derivatives, it has been suggested that "in the age of finance and speculative capital it seems that instead of the economy driving the markets, the markets are driving the economy."[28]

Speculation, as such, is not a new invention of postindustrial capitalism. What is new, however, is that instead of speculating in fluctuations in the prices of real assets, corn, oil, steel, weapons, or even shares in real productive companies, derivatives facilitate speculation in the price of money expressed in interest rates or exchange rates between different currencies.[29]

At the same time, derivatives are both insurances against fluctuations in the financial markets and catalysts for destabilization of the very same financial markets.

Sociological and historical studies have demonstrated that intellectual advances in modern finance theory have played a decisive role in the creation of a market for financial derivatives.[30] In this connection, it is difficult to overestimate the importance of Merton, Black, and Scholes's discovery of a method for the pricing of options based on the volatility of the price of their underlying asset.[31] This method is developed in continuation of modern finance theory and builds on the assumption of market efficiency.

In principle, options pricing is merely a technique for actors in the market to calculate the "fair" price of an option, thus facilitating and improving market efficiency. However, it has also been argued that the methods of modern finance, including especially the Merton, Black, and Scholes options pricing model, have played a key role in several of the crises to hit the financial markets over the last 20–30 years. Insofar as these crises call into question the feasibility of assuming market efficiency, modern finance theory seems to be simultaneously a facilitator of market efficiency and an intrinsic part of market inefficiency.

One of the practical applications of options pricing is portfolio insurance. When the financial markets crashed in October 1987 and the Dow Jones industrial average fell suddenly by 22.6 percent in one trading day, portfolio insurance was a widespread practice. As the market dropped below a certain level, issuers of portfolio insurance would act in unison, selling their positions in order to keep the losses of their clients' portfolios within the boundary of their guarantees. This collective action exacerbated the effects of the price drops, thus propelling the market into an actual crash.[32]

In 1994, Long Term Capital Management (LTCM) was founded. LTCM was a hedge fund, and the idea of the fund was to apply the theories of Merton, Black, and Scholes to identify mispricings of options in the market and to take advantage of these market inefficiencies through arbitrage. The fund, which included Black and Scholes themselves, was hugely successful, and their strategy was soon emulated by competing hedge funds. However, in 1998 the free lunch ended. Two incidents caused a certain degree of disturbance in the market: a sudden liquidation of the portfolio of Salomon Brothers' U.S. arbitrage desk, and Russia's default on its debt in ruble-denominated bonds. Even though both of these incidents should only have caused minor effects on the global financial markets as a

whole, the success of LTCM seemed to have created a mainstreaming of trading strategies in the market, thus again causing a great number of actors to behave in similar fashion and bringing about a major market crisis.[33]

Insofar as the methods of modern finance are being used to calculate the risk exposure of banks and other financial institutions, the financial crisis of 2007–8 seems to call into question once again the extent to which these methods apply to the actual market conditions of contemporary capitalism. Of course, the final call on the causes of the crisis is yet to be made. However, it is reasonable to suggest that the crisis is not merely the result of greed, cheating, and general mismanagement by individuals in the financial industry. A significant element of systemic failure of the market seems to be an intrinsic part of the crisis. Critics of modern finance theory have argued that not only do the models of the theory miscalculate the level of risk involved in different kinds of investments and financial dispositions, but the very idea that risks in the market can be calculated, managed, and ultimately eliminated is a fantasy, which itself contributes significantly to the volatility and riskiness of the financial markets and furthermore multiplies the effects, once inevitable market collapses do occur.[34]

If we say, with Žižek, that industrial capitalism is a capitalization of the real, then postindustrial capitalism is a capitalization of the imaginary. As we have already touched upon, the imaginary has the form of a phantasm.[35] The imaginary structures the relationship between the real and the symbolic through a fantasy of their reconciliation. Under the gold standard, the money form structures the relation between commodity and capital through the phantasm that money can become gold. In this phantasm, gold functions to reconcile money as a symbolic expression of value with value as embedded in the real. As long as this phantasm is sustained, the money form constitutes a stable frame for the exchange of commodities and capital.

In postindustrial capitalism after the collapse of Bretton Woods, the money form is, however, destabilized. There is a permanent uncertainty about what money may become, what money may be exchanged for, and at what price. The imaginary order is no longer a stable frame but a fragmented system of segments, constantly fluctuating in relation to each other. Derivatives are an expression of a capitalization of the imaginary order, which has realized the fragmentation of the imaginary order and is seeking to profit from fluctuations within the order. Speculation in derivatives relies on an ambiguity toward modern finance theory and the idea of market efficiency. On the one hand, speculators use the tools of modern finance, which are based on the hypothesis of market efficiency, to identify

profitable trading opportunities. On the other hand, these trading oppor-
tunities constitute minor or major instances of market inefficiency, thus in
principle refuting the very basis of the theories. Yet, most importantly,
speculation remains most profitable as long as there are other actors in the
market who maintain an unambiguous, steadfast belief in the efficiency of
the market. Speculators can afford not to believe in the efficiency of the
market as long as there are others who do believe.

Figure 10 is an illustration of the economy of postindustrial capitalism.
As we saw in industrial capitalism, value is produced in the order of the real
by labor's processing of nature, and this value is furthermore redistributed
in the symbolic order via the circulation of capital and commodities. What
is new in postindustrial capitalism is that production and circulation of
value no longer take place within a unitary money form. Instead, the imag-
inary order is fragmented into several different money markets, each fluc-
tuating in relation to the others. Money no longer functions as universal
equivalent but as a series of particular equivalents. Fluctuations between
these equivalents enable new redistributions of value. By trading deriva-
tives and other financial products, it is possible either to ensure against
such redistribution through hedging or to take advantage of the redistrib-
ution through speculation. However, it might require strong belief in the
fantasy of the efficient market to make any unambiguous distinction be-
tween hedging and speculation.

NO-LIMIT CAPITALISM

> In my view, derivatives are financial weapons of mass destruction.
> —*Warren Buffett*[36]

> I go into a poker game with the idea of completely destroying it.
> —*Doyle Brunson*[37]

In the analysis of the ontology of poker at the beginning of the book, we
saw how the circulation of value in poker takes place along three different
dimensions. Accordingly, subjects in the game may take three ideal-typical
positions corresponding to their way of playing the game. This was ana-
lyzed in chapter 7. Figure 11 illustrates how the three ways of playing
poker correspond to an emphasis of the real, the symbolic, and the imagi-
nary dimensions of the game respectively.

The Sucker is playing his luck in the order of the real. He believes the
game to be governed by chance and thus luck. His symbolic reading of the
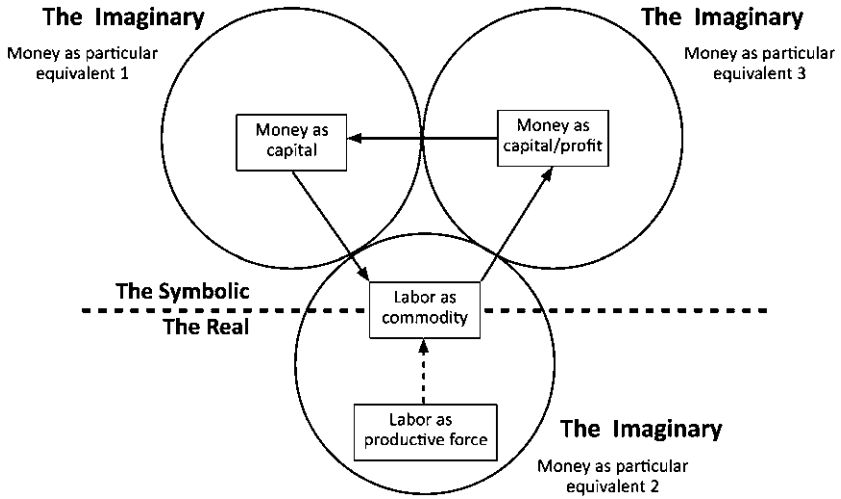
Fig. 10. Three ontological orders of postindustrial capitalism
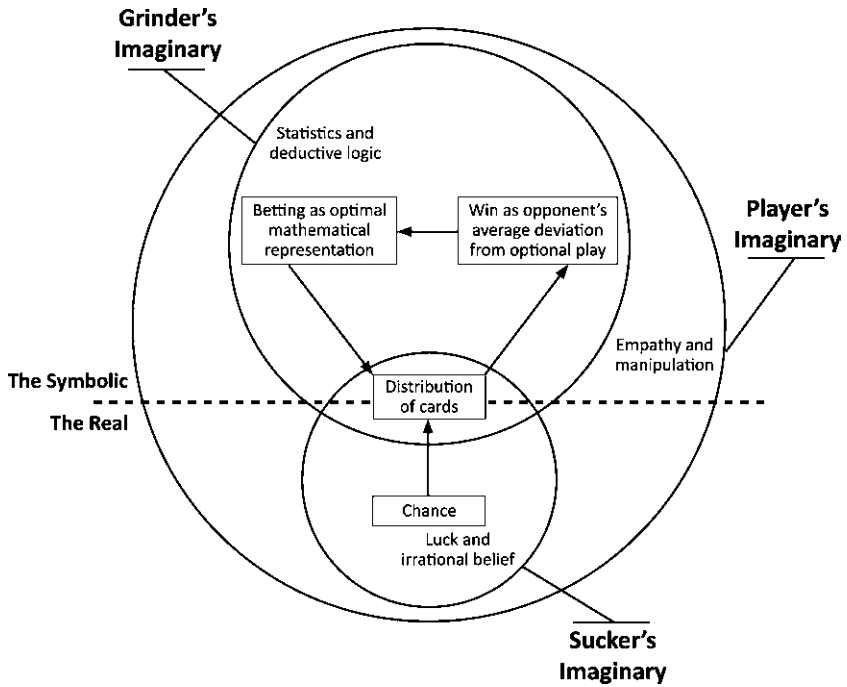
Fig. 11. Three ontological orders of poker

game is very simple. It takes into account only the current strength of his hand and a very crude notion of the potential strength of the hand. He fails to take into account the other players' reading of the game. He will win some hands simply by being dealt strong hands, by making lucky draws, or by being misread by opponents because his playing follows no rational pattern; but in the long run he is most likely to lose his money being outplayed by the Grinder or the Player. The Sucker is thus the one feeding the game with money. As we have already touched upon, he is sometimes referred to as a "fish," meaning that he is at the bottom of the food chain and destined to be eaten by sharks as an "ATM," meaning that he is the one dispensing cash into the game, or simply as the "producer" of the game.

The Grinder is playing the cards in the order of the symbolic. He submits every decision in the game to logical scrutiny, and to him poker is a contest on mathematical optimization. He relies on being able to outplay opponents by estimating with superior accuracy the value of a hand at every moment of the game. Against inferior opponents, the Grinder will grind out a steady win by profiting on other players' errors, that is, their deviations from mathematically optimal play. Furthermore, he is counting on the Law of Great Numbers to even out in the long run lucky draws by his opponents.

The Player is playing the man in the order of the imaginary. He masters the same calculations as the Grinder, and he is aware of what would be considered the "correct play" in a given situation. Sometimes he will play the correct play, but at times he will deliberately deviate from the logical pattern in order to lure and trap opponents. His strength lies in his capacity for empathy and psychological manipulation. The Player provokes fluctuations between his own imaginary order and his opponent's, and when the difference between the two is in his favor, he strikes by putting a fatal play on his unknowing opponent.

The three dimensions and the three possible positions in poker are comparable to the dimensions and possible positions in contemporary postmodern capitalism as a system for circulation of value.

Since poker is a zero-sum game, obviously there is no production of value in the game. Nevertheless, the position of the Sucker in poker may be compared to that of the worker in capitalism. Just like the worker, the Sucker acts in the most immediate relation to the real. The worker produces value by processing the real, in the form of natural products. The Sucker only wins when the real, in the form of randomness, graces him with a strong hand or a lucky draw. And just like the worker is the one feed-

ing the capitalist system with surplus value to be exploited by capitalists and speculators, it is the Sucker who feeds the game of poker with money to be redistributed in the order of the symbolic and the imaginary in favor of the Grinder and the Player.

The Grinder may be compared to the position of the traditional capitalist. The capitalist accumulates profit by pricing labor at an exchange value that is below the actual use value of productive labor. In similar fashion, the Grinder grinds out his profit by "trading" the Sucker's hand at a price deviating from the mathematically optimal. The Grinder is betting his hands at a "price" that is optimal according to the mathematical logic of the symbolic order. At the same time, he is waiting for the Sucker to make mistakes by either betting too high, folding too early, or otherwise deviating from the actual value of his hands. The Sucker operates in the order of the real, but value in the game is distributed according to the rules and rationalities of the symbolic order. The Grinder exploits this difference. The difference between the Grinder's and the Sucker's respective deviations from optimal play represents the Grinder's margin of profit. This is comparable to the rate at which the capitalist exploits the worker in capitalism. The capitalist guards himself from threats to his business such as strikes, extreme weather, new competition in the market, changes in consumer preferences, and so on by adopting a long-term perspective. He may experience good months and bad months, good years and bad years with varying dividends on his investments, but he knows that in the long run, these fluctuations will even out, securing him an overall steady profit. The grinder is also comparable to an investor who places his savings in the financial markets based on a strong belief in the efficiency of these markets. He believes that proper portfolio management, diversification, and hedging of risks will provide him with a steady and secured return on his investment.

Finally, the way the Player amasses value in poker is comparable to the maneuvering of the speculator in postmodern capitalism. The speculator exploits fluctuations between different money markets. He may take a position in one currency for money borrowed in another currency, profiting from sudden changes in the exchange rate between the two. Sometimes the speculator is even in a position where he himself provokes such changes. The speculator exploits contractions and expansions in the very forms of money, causing discrepancies between different segments of the imaginary order of capitalism. In similar fashion, the Player exploits discrepancies between his own and his opponent's imaginations of the game. The specula-

tor is not looking for steady dividends on his investments. He is looking to make lots of money in a very short time and preferably in one single stroke. This equals the temporality of the Player's game. The Player is not looking to slowly grind out a steady profit but to make big wins on individual spectacular moves. He may need the same patience as the Grinder, but he is not waiting for the Law of Great Numbers to even out chance but rather for chance at some time to bring about the particular situation he is planning to exploit for the big win. The speculator will utilize modern finance theories based on the efficient market hypothesis but only to identify instances where these theories do not fit the actual market. Similarly, the Player applies probability theory and logic but always with a careful attention to the insufficiency of these techniques with regards to an actual poker game.

The evolution from Limit Seven-Card Stud to No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em catalyzes the importance of the imaginary dimension in poker. First, the smaller number of exposed cards makes reading in Texas Hold 'Em more contingent on a psychological profiling of opponents, that is, a reading of their imagination of the game. Second, with a no-limit betting structure the consequences of individual pots on the overall outcome of a game session are much greater than in limit play. This means you can no longer rely on the Law of Great Numbers to even out the game in the long run if you just play by the statistical odds. Even if you lose only one single hand misjudging an opponent, this hand may be exactly the one busting your entire bankroll.

This is why No-Limit Texas Hold 'Em is the form of poker most emphatically simulating postmodern capitalism. With the collapse of Bretton Woods and the floating of currencies, the imaginary order of capitalism is fragmented. There is no uniform standard for the conversion of money into value. Money, the medium for the exchange of capital and commodities, itself becomes a commodity to be traded at different prices fluctuating over time and space. There is no secure medium for trading and pricing commodities, and there is not even a safe refuge for the storing of value. The dollar may go up or down relative to the euro, which may in turn move relative to the yen, and even buying gold is not without risk since this is just another commodity, priced according to market fluctuations. The elasticity of the money form cannot be ignored by any actor in the market, not even simple capitalists looking to make money on old-fashioned exploitation.

Even though the financial markets may have a largely virtual character with fluctuations due to purely imaginary and speculative causes, that is, changes in the expectations of the market rather than actual changes in the

market, the effects of these fluctuations on the rest of the economy are often as real as droughts, strikes, or war. Say speculators increase the supply of a given currency, driving down its price; this will have profound implications for a local manufacturer importing raw material for his production from other regions, for a local entrepreneur financing his business expansion with foreign capital, for all the workers employed in these businesses, and for the consumers in the region insofar as part of their consumption consists of imported goods. In a global economy, there is no safe place to hide from the whims of the financial markets.

Similarly, in a game of no-limit poker there is a constant risk of being played. The very nature of poker is its incomplete information. No hand, apart from the stone-cold nuts (the best possible hand), has absolute value. The value of a hand depends on its strength relative to opponents' hands. Therefore, players are forced to imagine which cards their opponents are holding. When trying to deduce an opponent's hand from his betting action, there is a constant risk that the opponent is deliberately misrepresenting his hand, for example, by bluffing a weak hand or slow-playing a strong hand. Since each player holds and lacks different pieces of information about the game situation, each player will generate his own imaginary conception of the situation. Hence, the imaginary order of the game is fragmented, and great discrepancies between different imaginations are made possible. In no-limit poker, the effects of such discrepancies are magnified, and there is no way of playing your cards safely. You may be able to neutralize the fluctuations in the real, that is, in the randomness of the cards, by using logic and statistics, but there is no way of neutralizing the fluctuations in the imaginary order by mathematical calculations. Just like a boxer who lulls his opponent into a certain rhythm only to deliver a knockout punch on the offbeat, the superior Player will give the impression of playing according to a predictable pattern until his opponent feels confident of being able to read him. At this moment, the Player will deviate from his pattern, luring his opponent into a devastating play.

This corresponds to the way that extended periods of continuous growth in the financial markets have the tendency of gradually obliterating investors' memory of past financial crises and crashes. In periods of financial stability, markets appear to conform to the theory of market efficiency, and investors become more and more confident, placing an ever growing proportion of their assets at the risk of these markets. This loss of memory seems to extend even to the level of government regulators, who facilitate and even encourage this "financialization" of the assets of society.[38] In

poker, the Player makes his profits from opponents who mistake their own imagination of the game for a bulletproof theory. Similarly, speculators in contemporary capitalism make their profits from investors and governments who mistake their fantasies about the financial markets for undisputable truths. The Player and the speculator share the same Lacanian realization that "there is no metalanguage."

In philosophical terms, the similarity between postindustrial capitalism and no-limit poker is found in the impossibility of subordinating the imaginary to the symbolic. Neither financial markets nor the playing styles of skilled poker players are governed by definite rationality allowing their movements to be symbolized and predicted logically. At the same time, the relation between the symbolic and the real is highly affected by fluctuations in the imaginary order. The capitalist is never left at rest to just steadily and safely exploit the worker. His profit is rather constantly in danger of being swallowed by the speculator. Similarly, there is no safe place for the Grinder to slowly take advantage of the Sucker's miscalculations. He is rather at constant risk of being "played" by the Player.

POKER AND THE CONTRADICTIONS OF CAPITALISM

Perhaps in any society, but certainly in capitalism, class is determined relative to the circulation of money. The class position of an individual is determined by her position in the systems of the production and circulation of value and money. Thus, playing with money is ipso facto playing with class. Along these lines, we see here how poker functions as a simulated class struggle, a parody of the class conflicts inherent in society. The struggle between Suckers, Grinders, and Players in Texas Hold 'Em is a simulation of the struggle between different positions within the system of production and circulation of value in contemporary capitalism. In capitalism, these different positions can be conceived as class positions, and, with Baudrillard, we can conceive of poker as a parodic simulation of class struggle.

The relationship between poker and class struggle is indicated by poker player and researcher Rex L. Jones, who states:

> Poker is a pure expression of the American dream. Embodied in the action of the game is the ever-present notion that anyone with skill, individual initiative, patience, foresight, and a little luck can easily make the leap from rags to riches. . . . In the American dream, society is classless, anyone can play; it is the same with poker.[39]

The American Dream is the imagination of a society structured entirely by the principles of individual ability and achievement. Historian James Truslow Adams, who coined the phrase, defines the American Dream as the dream of a "social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."[40] The idea is that the realization of such a social order provides the maximum wealth and development for the individual subjects as well as society as a whole.

We have seen in the previous analysis how poker is organized as a class structure. There is, however, a crucial difference between classes in poker and classes in society. In society, the class position of an individual subject is largely predetermined by factors beyond the control of the individual. In capitalism, class is a priori. This is what Marx is referring to as he says:

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. . . . The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.[41]

Even though we find, in postindustrial societies, varying degrees of social mobility, an individual's place in the class structure is still to a significant degree determined by "the fortuitous circumstances of birth and position." But when players sit down at a poker table, they are equal from the starting point. The only requirement for participation is the ability and willingness to put up enough money for the buy-in. Contrary to society, class position in a game of poker is determined a posteriori. How you fare in poker is determined by your game, not your name.

In society, a person is born into a specific position. Obviously, this happens only once. This position constitutes his a priori starting point in society. Some people are born into wealthy families or otherwise fortunate circumstances and they have every opportunity of succeeding in life. Other people are born into socioeconomic circumstances so dire that their odds of doing well in life are worse than those of completing an inside straight draw. If we look at a single hand in isolation, poker constitutes a straightforward reflection of this functioning of class in society. In a single hand, one player might be dealt ace-ace, and the question is how much he wins rather than whether he wins or not. Another player might be dealt seven-

two or a similarly weak hand, and his chances of winning are extremely slim.

But, as we have seen, a game of poker is rarely played out on a single hand. The essence of the game unfolds only as it is stretched out over a larger amount of hands. Over the course of several rounds and even sessions, individual players' shares of weak and strong hands approximate a certain average. The class position of the player in the game is thus constituted by her way of playing the total conglomerate of weak and strong hands. As the number of rounds multiplies, the element of chance manifested in the random deal of cards diminishes. Eventually, the outcome of the game is determined by the players' skills and approach to the game.

The passage on class quoted from Marx above continues with the statement: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness."[42] However, the exact opposite is true in poker. In poker, the players' "being" in the game is determined by their intentional acts and the strategy they bring into the game. In this respect, poker is the realization of the American Dream of a classless social order, or perhaps more precisely, the American Dream of a social order where class is determined by ability and achievement.

In the introduction we quoted G. Barry Golson's statement on the relation between poker and class. It is, however, worth quoting again:

> The game is as perfect a microcosm as we have of the way a free-enterprise system is supposed to work, except that the rich don't necessarily get richer. Brass balls will do. [In a game of poker] a grocery clerk can humiliate an oil tycoon through sheer bravado—the object being, without exception, to bankrupt the bastard across the table.[43]

The statement captures eminently the ambivalence of poker as a cultural expression. It would be misleading to define poker unambiguously as either a celebration of capitalism or a critique of capitalism. Rather, the game seems to perform an extrapolation of the contradictions inherent in capitalism, being at the same time a celebration and a critique. The game constitutes a perfection of capitalism. Poker does not just imitate the class structure of capitalism. The game also constitutes an improvement in relation to society insofar as class position in the game is determined a posteriori and not a priori. Poker is an idealized version of democratic capitalism where everybody has equal access to the spheres of value circulation. In this way, poker points back to the imperfections of actually existing capi-

talism by demonstrating how capitalist society fails to live up to its own ideals.

At the same time, poker overtly displays the cynicism, greed, and mercilessness inherent in capitalism. Capitalism is often legitimized as being the optimal system for the allocation of resources in society, allegedly creating the maximum amount of wealth for the largest number of people. Hence the production of "losers" is seen as just an unintended side effect of the capitalist organization of society or just a temporary symptom of the incomplete implementation of this organization. In contrast, the production of losers as the precondition of the production of winners is very obvious in poker. This is recognized as an inherent condition of the game.

If poker is indeed accepted as a reflection of society, the game thus points to unpleasant truths about capitalism, possibly disturbing the self-image of capitalist society.

♠
♣
♥
♦   Conclusion: The Uncanniness of Poker

> "Ideology" is the "self-evident" surface structure whose function is to conceal the underlying "unbalanced," "uncanny" structure.[1]

Why do we laugh when we see a skilled impersonator performing a parody of a powerful politician, a celebrity, or an otherwise socially elevated person?

In our ordinary perception of other people, we understand words and demeanor as signs of different qualities of the person. A statement may be the sign of a political conviction, a smile the sign of joy, or an erect posture the sign of pride. Together with a belief that a person is always more than his symbolic representation, these signs constitute our impression of "who the other person really is." Furthermore, we like to think that the other person's position in the social order of society is attributable to his real qualities as a person. This is particularly true with extraordinarily powerful, rich, famous, or otherwise celebrated persons in society. We like to think that their special position in the social order corresponds to a set of special qualities in the order of the real.

Thinking with Žižek, we can add another dimension to this. The perception of the other person is not a mere decoding of signs to uncover the supposedly real qualities of the other. The reading of signs is supplemented by a projection of fantasies onto the image of the other. In fact, the whole idea that "behind" the conglomerate of outer signs in the form of verbal and body language is a real and coherent core of the self, is in itself a fan-

tasmatic projection. The projections of fantasies about the other person are always already shaped by the social context in which they are taking place. This means that when we perceive the facial gestures of a powerful politician as signs of his charismatic qualities, which in turn explain and justify his elevated social position, this perception is always already shaped by our awareness of his powerful position. A retroactive process is at play where fantasy projects qualities onto the other based on his position in the social order, while at the same time these very same qualities serve to account for this position. This is an example of ideology at work.

What happens in parodic impersonation is that the supposed signs of the impersonatee's real qualities are reproduced and presented outside of their normal context, that is, outside of the presence of the real impersonatee. The trick of the parodic impersonation, the thing that produces its effect and ultimately makes us laugh, is not that we are somehow fooled into thinking that the impersonator is in fact the impersonatee. The workings of parodic impersonation are more than simple deception. As the signs of the impersonatee's real qualities are disembedded from their ordinary context, they fail to evoke the supplement of fantasmatic projections. We see the mere signs isolated from ideology. Without the support of ideology, the aporias of the symbolic system become obvious. We are, in the words of Žižek, confronted with "the underlying, unbalanced, uncanny structure." The emptiness and contradictions of an otherwise forceful political speech, the commonness of an idolized rock star, or the profanity of the actions of a clergyman are exposed. The effect is a kind of desublimation.

The parodic impersonation exposes ideology by way of subtraction. When confronted with the signs unsupported by ideology, the fantasmatic element in our ordinary perception of the impersonatee becomes obvious. We become aware that the sublime qualities that seem to emanate directly from the impersonatee are in fact our own fantasmatic projections. When we laugh at the parodic impersonation, our laughter is not only because of the desublimated impersonatee, but because of an embarrassed reaction to the realization of the fantasmatic character of our own projections.

The philosophical idea of this book is to demonstrate how poker functions in comparable fashion in relation to capitalism. Poker reproduces characteristic features of capitalism but presents them in a form and a context where they are not embedded in the fantasies of capitalist ideology. Poker is an imitation of capitalism where the fantasmatic element of ideology is subtracted. There is no claim that the game serves any purpose in relation to any order of the real. What goes on in a game of poker is not a ra-

tional, true, or just representation of anything. Thus it makes no sense to believe or not believe in poker. To quote again Baudrillard:

> Without a psychological or metaphysical foundation, the rule has no grounding in belief. One neither believes nor disbelieves a rule—one observes it. The diffuse sphere of belief, the need for credibility that encompasses the real, is dissolved in the game. Hence their immorality: *to proceed without believing in it*, to sanction a direct fascination with conventional signs and groundless rules.[2]

In Žižek's terms, poker does not pretend to reconcile the discrepancy between the symbolic and the real. Sometimes the outcome of a hand is a direct reflection of the actual strength of the player's hands, say when a pair of aces beats a pair of kings. And sometimes the opposite is the case and the weakest hand takes down the pot. Most importantly, the first is not the rule and the latter merely an exception to the rule. Both outcomes are equally conceivable within the framework of the game. The traumatic split between the symbolic and the real, the representation of a hand and its actual strength, is not veiled by fantasy but rather institutionalized as an intrinsic feature of the game.

There is no normative content in poker *an sich*. The game does not present a critique or condemnation of capitalism. Still, the game is a parody of the way capitalism and especially contemporary financial capitalism functions. One the one hand, poker models the fundamental mechanisms of capitalism, and on the other, the game demonstrates that these mechanisms are not guided by efficiency, rationality, or even justice in any absolute sense of the words.

The beauty of poker is revealed at precisely those moments when strict logic, calculation, rationality, and even justice fall short. And the quality of truly great poker players is the ability to seize these moments. The thrill and excitement of these moments emanate from within the game of poker itself. But, in addition, as one author suggests: "Great gamblers have seen the grim absurdities in capital and its accumulation. They know money is merely a game (like 10,000 on the Dow) and they insist on being playful with it."[3] These are poetic moments, where the arbitrariness at the heart of the functioning of money is revealed. At these moments, poker provides a peek into the absurdity of capitalism. In poker, the functioning of the allegedly free market is caricatured in all its fallibility without the fantasmatic veil of ideology attempting to gloss over the absurdity.

Inherent in fantasies such as the invisible hand of the market, the

efficient market hypothesis, or the meritocracy of free market economy is the idea that transactions in the market ultimately serve the common good of society. The financial markets allegedly optimize the productive capacity of society, and even if individual speculators amass amounts of wealth unproportional to the income of those people who produce actual value, this is easily compensated by the net value gained by the optimization of production generated by their financial transactions. As agents in the financial markets increase the total size of the societal "pie," it is regarded as only fair that they receive also a bigger share of the pie themselves. It is a system where everyone can win at the same time.

Poker offers similar possibilities for amassing wealth through sheer circulation of value. Yet lacking the fantasies of being linked to production in any way, poker does not present itself as a game of winners only. The overt zero-sum structure of the game makes it very clear that whenever someone wins a dollar, another player in the game has lost a dollar. The money does not come from nowhere. Contrary to capitalism, no attempt is made in poker to deny or conceal the extraction of money going on between players in a game or to justify this extraction with reference to some common good. Contrary to capitalism, there is in poker a general agreement that the object of the game is, as was formulated in the previous chapter, "without exception, to bankrupt the bastard across the table."

Poker is often viewed as a game of deception. This is true, insofar as the game comes down to misleading opponents and concealing the true nature of the hand you are holding. Yet, at the same time, a radical form of honesty is at play in poker. When players sit down at a poker table, they automatically enter into an unspoken contract stating that they will do whatever it takes, within the rules of the game, including lie and deceive, to take away as much as possible of the opponents' money. This contract institutes a kind of metahonesty, in effect making it impossible for a player to lie as none of the opponents are justified in expecting him to tell the truth. Such level of honesty is seen rarely, if ever, in life outside of poker, whether it be in the domain of business, politics, or even love.

The study of society and poker is based on the distinction between law (society) and rules (game) derived from Baudrillard. In the classic sociology of Émile Durkheim, law is viewed as the "visible symbol" of the shared beliefs and moral attitudes of a community of society.[4] Studying law, the sociologist is provided with a methodological point of entry into mapping the *conscience collective*, the collective consciousness of society. If studying the laws of society is a way of studying the collective consciousness of society,

we might suggest that the study of the rules of games played in society is a way of studying the collective *un*conscious of society.

We have seen that poker provides us with a kind of analysis of capitalism and an exposition of the fantasies inherent in the functioning of capitalism. This suggests that there is a kind of knowledge about capitalism contained in poker. This, of course, is not to say that individual poker players have this knowledge and could articulate it in an elaborate form. First, it is the game rather than the individual players that is the bearer of the knowledge, much as a piece of art is the bearer of cultural meaning rather than the individual artist. Second, this knowledge is not articulated in spoken or written words but rather implicitly contained in the very act of playing the game of poker. Poker does not purport to be true, moral, or even beautiful. Players do not engage with poker because they have been rationally convinced by the value or purpose of the game. We may recall here Huizinga's words: "the fun of playing . . . resists all analysis, all logical interpretation."[5] Poker operates, rather, in the order of seduction.

The knowledge contained in poker can be characterized through Žižek's definition of the unconscious as "knowledge that doesn't know itself."[6] The unconscious, in Lacanian thinking, is not a conglomerate of blind, irrational instincts. This is expressed in the often quoted formula: "The unconscious is structured as a language."[7] The unconscious is a key component in the functioning of life in ordinary reality. The unconscious is the site of fantasies that compensate for the aporias and traumatic inconsistencies of reality. And for that precise reason, it is crucial for the maintenance of ordinary reality that this knowledge remain "unknown."

The excitement of playing poker comes from a simultaneous recognizability and estrangement. Poker offers an opportunity to interact playfully with the "unknown" knowledge of the collective unconscious. The player will recognize in the game features of the general conditions of life in contemporary capitalism while at the same time being confronted with something that is utterly different from life outside the game.

Baudrillard offers a poetic vision of the way analytical thinking should interact with the objects of the world with which it engages. This vision may serve as an emphatic account of the way poker interacts with capitalism. Thus, we shall be concluding with a slightly altered quotation of Baudrillard's words.[8]

Poker does not seek to penetrate some mystery of capitalism, nor to discover its hidden aspect—it *is* that hidden aspect. It does not discover that capitalism has a double life—it *is* that double life, that parallel life.

Merely by conforming to its slightest movements, poker strips capitalism of its meaning, and predestines it for ends other than the ones it sets itself. Merely by following in its tracks, poker shows that, behind its supposed ends, capitalism is going nowhere.

The act of playing is an act of seduction which aims to deflect the world from its being and its meaning—at the risk of being itself seduced and led astray.

This is how poker proceeds with capitalism. It does not seek to criticize capitalism, or set limits for capitalist society in the real. It maximizes capitalism, exacerbates it, by following its every movement; it seduces capitalism by pushing it to the limit. The object of poker is to arrive at an account of capitalism which follows out its internal logic to its end, without adding anything, yet which, at the same time, totally inverts it, revealing its hidden non-meaning, the Nothing which haunts it, that absence at the heart of capitalism, that shadow running alongside it.[9]

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Economist 2007.
2. Caillois 1958/2001.
3. Lears 2003, 6.
4. Schwartz 2006; Reith 1999, 81–89.
5. Quoted in Spanier 1977/2002, 201.
6. Spiegel 2008.
7. Golson 1974, 110.
8. Among these books are Reith 1999, Lears 2003, Schwartz 2006.
9. Hayano 1982.
10. Among these books are Spanier 1977, Brunson 1978/2002, Alvarez 1983/2003, Sklansky 1987/2005, Holden 1990/2004, McManus 2003, Alson 2006, Brown 2006, Wilson 2007, McManus 2009.

CHAPTER 1

1. The figure is found in Lacan 1975/1982.
2. Žižek 1991b, 3–20.
3. Wittgenstein 1945/2001, §43.
4. Wittgenstein 1945/2001, §23.
5. Wittgenstein 1945/2001, §31.
6. In Lacanian terminology this is pointed out in the notion that "the letter kills" the real (Lacan 1964/2006, 848).
7. Siitonen and Pihlstrom 1998, 460–63.
8. E.g., Abrahams 1951, Humble 1993, Saidy 1994.
9. Campbell, Hoane, and Hsu 2002.
10. Billings 2006, 4–6.

11. Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 125.

12. Leibniz 1714/1991, §32.

13. We find this most eminently expressed in Laplace's causal deterministic view of the universe: "We may regard the present state of the universe as the effect of its past and the cause of its future. An intellect which at a certain moment would know all forces that set nature in motion, and all positions of all items of which nature is composed, if this intellect were also vast enough to submit these data to analysis, it would embrace in a single formula the movements of the greatest bodies of the universe and those of the tiniest atom; for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes" (Laplace 1795/1951, 4).

14. Chess romantics would certainly object to this mechanistic view of chess, asserting that creativity, fantasy, and spontaneity are crucial elements in successful chess play. We may partly consent to this view by remarking that insofar as no human being will ever be able to calculate through the nearly infinite possible game situations in chess, creativity, fantasy, and spontaneity remain crucial elements of actual chess playing as compensation for the lack of a complete mathematical theory of chess.

15. Žižek 1991b, 33.

16. Žižek 1999, 60.

17. Žižek 1989, 69, 169.

18. Dostoyevsky 1866/2004, 11.

19. Reith 1999, 156–59.

20. McDonald 1950/1996, 39.

21. Barthelme and Barthelme 1999, 67–68.

22. Žižek 1989, 123.

23. Žižek 1989, 45.

24. Žižek 1997, 82.

25. The story is retold in Žižek 1989, 58.

26. Žižek 1991b, 31–32.

27. Žižek 1991b, 33.

28. Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 143–68.

29. Walker and Walker 2004, 39.

30. Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 164.

31. Walker and Walker 2004, 43.

32. Walker and Walker 2004, 46–50.

33. Walker and Walker 2004, 63.

34. Billings 2006, 57.

35. Standard RPS strategy assumes typical Rock players to be "overbearing," "aggressive," "powerful," and "blunt" (Walker and Walker 2004, 47).

36. Žižek 1989, 185–86.

37. According to standard RPS strategy, the typical Scissors player is "devious," "ingenious," "reactive," and "sharp" (Walker and Walker 2004, 51).

38. Standard RPS strategy describes the typical Paper player as "protective," "passive," "thoughtful," and "flimsy" (Walker and Walker 2004, 49).

39. Žižek 1999, 109–10.

40. Lacan 1960/2006, 688.
41. Lukacs 1963, 62.

CHAPTER 2

1. McDonald 1950/1996, 37.
2. The hand and Hansen's reflections during his play are reported in Hansen 2008.
3. Hansen 2008, 195.
4. Hansen 2008, 196.
5. Hansen 2008, 196–98.
6. For precise calculations of pot odds and implied pot odds see Sklansky 1987/2005, 35–62.
7. Antonius explained his considerations in a conversation after the game (Hansen 2008, 198–99).

CHAPTER 3

1. Lacan 1966a/2006.
2. Hacking 1990.
3. Kavanagh 1993, 14–15.
4. Brunson 1978/2002, 19.
5. Alvarez 1983/2003, 42.
6. The early Wittgenstein of *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1918/2001) is a central point of reference for this approach to language.
7. The late Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* (1945/2001) is a key proponent of this position. More recent authors in this school of thought include Michel Foucault and Niklas Luhmann.
8. Marx and Freud are the classic representatives of this approach to language. Žižek is one contemporary continuation of this tradition.
9. Wittgenstein 1918/2001, 4.1, 4.2, 4.3.
10. Hellmuth 2003.
11. Wittgenstein 1945/2001, §23.
12. See Chen and Ankenman 2006, 59–69, on how general betting patterns and logical deductions on individual bets tie into each other.
13. Brown 2006, 257.
14. Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 124.
15. "If the theory of Chess were really fully known there would be nothing left to play" (Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 124).
16. Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 128.
17. Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 143–68.
18. Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 164.
19. Chen and Ankenman 2006, 370.
20. Chen and Ankenman 2006, 101.
21. This strategy is recommended by Sklansky 1987/2005, 163–90.
22. Brown 2006, 251.

23. Lacan 1960/2006, 688.

24. The distinction between tactics and strategy is adopted from chess theory (Shenk 2006, 204). The distinction naturally also applies to slow-playing. For the sake of convenience, in the following we shall be treating slow-play as just another form of bluffing.

25. The hand is recorded in Alvarez 2001, 83.

26. Žižek 1997, 82.

27. Žižek 1997, 29.

28. Žižek 1997, 29.

29. Brown 2006, 15.

30. Brown 2006, 244–45.

31. Žižek 1989, 122.

32. Derrida 1992, 26.

33. Holden 1990/2004, 91–92.

CHAPTER 4

1. The phrase "changing gears" is used to denote a situation wherein a player makes a sudden shift in his style of playing, e.g., by suddenly loosening up after having played tight for a period of time (Brunson 1978/2002, 26). The point of changing gears is to make oneself difficult for opponents to read and perhaps even manipulate opponents into fatal assumptions about the actual nature of your cards.

2. All interview excerpts are translated from Danish by the author.

3. Nolan Dalla cited in Wilson 2007, 82–83.

4. Sklansky 1987/2005, 14–16.

5. Wilson 2007, 116.

6. Craig 2005.

7. Estimate from www.kostenlos-pokern.at (2009).

8. Estimate from www.kostenlos-pokern.at (2009).

9. This analysis would not have been possible without diligent and competent assistance from Martin Cramer Pedersen.

10. The figures designate the maximum buy-in. NL 50 equals blinds of $0.25–$0.50. Correspondingly, NL $5,000 equals blinds of $25–$50.

CHAPTER 5

1. Helmuth 2005.

2. David Sklansky is perhaps the classic reference for this kind of poker playing. See Sklansky 1987/2005, Sklansky and Miller 2006.

3. Hansen 2008, 116–17.

4. Crockett 2009.

5. Crockett 2009.

6. McCutcheon 1987, 5–6.

7. McCutcheon 1987, 8.

8. The five-class model was tested against a four-class model and a six-class model rendering significantly lower log-likelihood values in the five-class model.

CHAPTER 6

1. Poker writer and poker player Mike Caro quoted in Hayano 1982, 138.
2. Findlay 1986, 44–78; Wilson 2007, 67–76.
3. Hayano 1982.
4. See, for instance, Wilson's description of illegal poker playing in Texas from the 1950s through the 1980s (Wilson 2007, 79–126).
5. Wilson 2007, 273.
6. Hayano 1982, 6.
7. Bauman 1998, 34.
8. Rose 1989, 116.
9. Gay 1996, 78.
10. Costea, Crump, and Holm 2007, Andersen 2009.
11. Kristensen 2009.
12. See, for instance, Evered and Selman 1995, 195.
13. Seidelin refers to business consultant Brian Tracy's book *Goals!* (2003) as key inspiration for his theory on poker.
14. See Seidelin 2008. The skills identified by Seidelin are comparable to Hayano's description of the personal characteristics that differentiate winners from losers: "The most common traits that gambling winners are presumed to possess are (1) mental alertness and concentration on the task at hand, (2) strong self-discipline, (3) a great desire to win, (4) tremendous self-confidence, (5) the ability to surprise, (6) an excellent knowledge of the probability of events, (7) a more than average analytical mind, and (8) the ability to judge other individuals correctly. In addition to these I suggest that the major factor that gives professionals and winners a significant edge at poker is their knowledge of valuable game and metagame strategies" (1982, 72). Basil R. Browne makes the following comparable definition: "Good gamesmanship consists of three elements: first, playing the technical game well; second, good money management; and third, good emotion management" (Browne 1989, 9).
15. The explanations in the table are based on Seidelin's article and personal interview.
16. McDonald 1950/1996, 25.
17. Hayano 1982, 7.
18. Taylor and Hilger 2007, 171.
19. Quoted in Alvarez 1983/2003, 43.
20. Alvarez 2001, 87.
21. Taylor and Hilger 2007, 137.
22. Taylor and Hilger 2007, 142. The list is comparable to Browne's list of tilt-inducing situations: "excessive use of drugs and alcohol, badbeats, the operation of the gambling establishment, needling, escape gambling, playing very long hours, and several consecutive losing sessions despite playing well" (Browne 1989, 13).
23. Rosenthal 1995, 368.
24. Rosenthal 1995, 368.
25. In theology this is known as the "theodicy problem."
26. Fink 1995, 55.

27. Brunson 1978/2002, 11.

28. Alvarez 1983/2003, 113. Similar accounts are found in Hayano 1982, 19–20.

29. Holden 1990/2004, 95.

30. Taylor and Hilger 2007, 257.

31. In the passage is one of the few moments when an interviewee refers to money in Danish currency. Typically, poker players speak of money in terms of dollars or euros. We may reflect on the point that in these remarks money bet and won is counted in foreign currency, while money lost is counted in Danish crowns. DKK 1,000,000 is the equivalent of approximately $200,000.

chapter 7

1. Bennet 1995, 267.

2. Weber 1904/1949, 93.

3. Brunson 1978/2002, 334.

4. An "inside straight draw" designates a situation where a player is holding four cards to a straight, and the missing card is in the middle of the straight, for example 7, 9, 10, J.

5. Obviously, we need some more information about stack sizes, previous play, etc., in order to properly determine whether this is actually a sucker's play. The example is heuristic, not an exercise in poker theory. Readers with advanced knowledge in poker theory are thus requested to disregard the incompleteness of the description of the game situation.

6. Bjerg 2008a, 52–57.

7. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 143.

8. Goffman 1967, 239.

9. Alvarez 1983/2003, 114.

10. Goffman 1967, 237–38.

11. Schopenhauer 1818/1966.

12. Martinez and LaFranchi 1972, 66–67.

13. Reith 1999, 176.

14. Hacking 1990.

15. Sklansky 1987/2005, 17–18.

16. Sklansky 1987/2005, 17.

17. Dostoyevsky 1866/2004, 11.

18. Kant 1785/1993, 30.

19. Bennet 1995, 270.

20. Žižek 1989, 163.

21. Žižek 2000, 28.

22. Lacan 1963/2006.

23. Žižek 1991a, 229–33.

24. Sklansky 1987/2005, 13; emphasis added.

25. Sklansky 1987/2005, 13.

26. Žižek 1997, 30.

27. Žižek 1991b, 5.

28. The hand is reported in Sklansky 1987/2005, 57–58.
29. Dalla and Alson 2005.
30. This is indeed how the hand is interpreted in Sklansky 1987/2005, 57–58.
31. Bennet 1995, 11.
32. Lacan 1960/2006, 688.
33. Alvarez 2001, 50.
34. Alvarez 2001, 50.
35. Quoted in Žižek 1992, 220.
36. Quoted in Caro 1979, 90.
37. Žižek 1999, 296.
38. Žižek 1989, 3.
39. See Brunson 1978/2002, 26; Alvarez 2001, 51.
40. Two players play heads-up simultaneously on four tables.

CHAPTER 8

1. Lears 2003, 8–9.
2. Blaszczynski and Nower 2002, 489.
3. Toneatto and Millar 2004.
4. For overviews see Viets and Miller 1997, Raylu and Oei 2002, Toneatto and Ladouceur 2003.
5. Gadboury and Ladouceur 1989, Griffiths 1994, Toneatto et al. 1997, Ladouceur and Walker 1998, Ladouceur et al. 2002, Jørsel 2003, Nielsen and Røjskjær 2005.
6. Petry and Roll 2001.
7. Blaszczynski and Nower 2002, 489.
8. Blaszczynski and Nower 2002, Raylu and Oei 2002, Toneatto and Ladouceur 2003, Toneatto and Millar 2004.
9. See Pavalko 2001, 3–17; Aasved 2002, 7–8.
10. WHO uses the term "pathological gambling."
11. World Health Organization 1992, 211.
12. World Health Organization 1992, 211–12.
13. Pavalko 2001, 5.
14. Retrieved from www.pokernet.dk (2009).
15. Retrieved from www.ekstrabladet.dk (2009).
16. Retrieved from www.pokernet.dk (2009).
17. Retrieved from www.pokernet.dk (2009).
18. Pavalko 2001, 4.
19. See Bjerg 2008b for an analysis of such an intertwining of subjective and organic effects in the case of drug addiction.
20. The notion of ethics here refers not to a moral distinction between good and bad acts. Rather, ethics is understood in an Aristotelian sense as the ability to balance different spheres of one's life. Such a notion of ethics is unfolded in Bjerg 2010.
21. Toneatto et al. 1997.
22. Morahan-Martin 2005.

23. Dalla and Alson 2005.
24. Bjerg 2009.
25. Schaufeli, Taris, and Bakker 2006.
26. Oates 1971, Cherrington 1980, Porter 1996.
27. Cantarow 1979, Machlowitz 1980, Peiperl and Jones 2001.
28. Naughton 1987.
29. Spence and Robbins 1992, Schaufeli, Taris, and Bakker 2006.
30. Pedersen 2009, 229–46.

CHAPTER 9

1. Huizinga 1938/2000, 4.
2. Huizinga 1938/2000, 9.
3. Baudrillard 1979/2001.
4. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 131.
5. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 136.
6. Huizinga 1938/2000, 7.
7. Žižek 1991b, 6.
8. Žižek 1989, 45.
9. Žižek 2003, 104–5.
10. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 131.
11. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 133.
12. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 138.
13. Huizinga 1938/2000, 3.
14. Žižek 1999, 297.
15. Quoted in Alvarez 1983/2003, 114.
16. Huizinga 1938/2000, 4.
17. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 157; emphasis added.
18. Žižek 1991a, 208.
19. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 132.
20. Huizinga 1938/2000, 13; numbering added.
21. Hayano 1982, 135.
22. McDonald 1950/1996, 26–27.
23. Quoted in Žižek 2003, 95.
24. Žižek 1989.
25. See Bjerg 2010 for an exposition of the theories of differentiation in Weber and Durkheim.
26. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 149.

CHAPTER 10

1. Cited in Alvarez 1983/2003, 28.
2. Parlett 1991.
3. Parlett 1991, 86–89.
4. Parlett 1991, 105–15; Schwartz 2006, 248.
5. Schwartz 2006, 249.

6. Findlay 1986, 47–48; Lears 2003, 159; McManus 2009, 67–73.
7. Marx 1867/1990, 125–31.
8. Marx 1867/1990, 126.
9. Hardt and Negri 2000, 226.
10. Schwartz 2006, 249.
11. Parlett 1991, 112–13.
12. Schwartz 2006, 249.
13. Findlay 1986, 48.
14. Parlett 1991, 112.
15. Marx 1867/1990, 270–73.
16. Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 17.
17. Parlett 1991, 113.
18. Lukacs 1963, 59.
19. Brown 2006, 41.
20. Brown 2006, 41.
21. For a vivid illustration of such reasoning see Yardley 1957/1980, 109–11.
22. Lukacs 1963, 59; Lubet 2006, 3–5; Wilson 2007, 76.
23. Aglietta 1979/2001, 116–22.
24. Hardt and Negri 2000, 241–42.
25. Boltanski and Chiapello 1999, 18.
26. Hardt and Negri 2000, 242–43.
27. Bernstein 2005, MacKenzie 2006/2008, Fox 2009.
28. Markowitz 1952.
29. Sharpe 1964.
30. Neumann and Morgenstern 1944/2004, 186–219.
31. Crandall Addington, quoted in Alvarez 1983/2003, 198.
32. Schwartz 2006, 413–14; Wilson 2007, 119–22.
33. McCloskey 2005.
34. Schwartz 2006, 493–94.
35. Clark 2006.
36. This is the calculation of so-called pot odds and implied pot odds (Sklansky 1987/2005).
37. Brunson 1978/2002, 333.
38. Brunson 1978/2002, 331, 419.
39. Hardt and Negri 2000, 261.
40. Bell 1973/1999.
41. Aglietta 1979/2001.
42. Lyotard 1979.
43. Goux 1997, 172.
44. Hardt and Negri 2000, 274.
45. Aglietta 1979/2001, 113.
46. Alvarez 1983/2003, 29.
47. Greenstein 2004, 19.
48. Alvarez 1983/2003, 29.

CHAPTER 11

1. Jones 1978, 27.
2. Quoted in Alvarez 1983/2003, 114.
3. Žižek 2010, 201.
4. Bjerg 2009.
5. Marx 1867/1990, 255.
6. Marx 1867/1990, 270–80.
7. Lacan 1964/2006, 848.
8. Marx 1867/1990, 247–57.
9. Fleetwood 1999.
10. Goux 1990.
11. As we have already touched upon, Lacan's imaginary order is sometimes re-ferred to as ideology when used in sociological analysis. In the current context, the terms are used synonymously.
12. Marx 1867/1990, 168.
13. Žižek 1997, 82.
14. Baudrillard 1998, 1.
15. Weatherford 1997, 159.
16. Panic 1995.
17. Kennedy 1999, Bryan and Rafferty 2006a.
18. Brown 2006, 189; Schwartz 2006, xiii.
19. Akyüz 1995.
20. LiPuma and Lee 2002, LiPuma and Lee 2004.
21. Bank for International Settlements 2010.
22. Bryan and Rafferty 2006a, 87.
23. Pryke and Allen 2000, Bryan and Rafferty 2006b, Bryan and Rafferty 2007.
24. Bryan and Rafferty 2007.
25. Bryan and Rafferty 2006a, 129.
26. Arnoldi 2004, LiPuma and Lee 2005.
27. Akyüz 1995, Pryke and Allen 2000, Tickell 2000.
28. LiPuma and Lee 2002, 209.
29. LiPuma and Lee 2005, 407.
30. Bernstein 2005, MacKenzie 2006/2008.
31. Black and Scholes 1973, Merton 1973.
32. MacKenzie 2006/2008, 179–210.
33. MacKenzie 2006/2008, 211–41.
34. Mandelbrot and Hudson 2004, Taleb 2007.
35. Žižek 2006a, 40.
36. Buffett 2002, 15.
37. Brunson 1978/2002, 26.
38. Phillips 2008.
39. Jones 1978, 27.
40. Adams 1933, 415.
41. Marx 1859/1962, 362–63.
42. Marx 1859/1962, 363.
43. Golson 1974, 110.

CONCLUSION

1. Žižek 1997, 82.
2. Baudrillard 1979/2001, 133.
3. Thomson 1999, 289.
4. Durkheim 1893/1997, 24.
5. Huizinga 1938/2000, 3.
6. Žižek 2006b, 52.
7. Lacan 1966b/2006, 737.
8. The words "world" and "system" have been substituted for "capitalism" or "capitalist society." "Thought" has been substituted for "poker" and "thinking" for "playing."
9. Baudrillard 1999/2001, 149.

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