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## THE SOCIAL REWARDS OF ONLINE GAMBLING

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Gambling games have been played around the world in most cultures where money has been in use (Binde 2005). The games and the ways of playing them have varied over time and space, but the core of gambling is always the same: players place a monetary bet on a possible outcome of some event. It is thus clear that money matters in gambling, but it is not the priority. More bluntly: gambling is not about money.

The economic rewards of gambling are relevant, but social rewards are more important to most gamblers than winning money. Gambling games always carry socio-cultural values and meanings, which affect their popularity. Gambling and related activities never take place in a vacuum nor are they ever disconnected from more general social interaction.

Those influential anthropological theories that have verified these observations should now be applied to the study of online gambling.

In his important article *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* Clifford Geertz (1972) pointed out how important the social relations between bettors are. When Balinese people bet on cockfights they did not necessarily bet on the cock they believed was going to win the fight. In other words, they knew losing was almost certain, but more important was to show support to one's own social group, for example to the village the bird represented. By placing bets, these players could declare that they were true members of their village and were willing to take risks on behalf of their community. Betting confirmed the social relations between villagers and made the boundaries between communities more visible. When this is the starting point for gambling, monetary losses matter less than social rewards, which are gained by merely participating in the game.

The Balinese example resonates with present-day gambling cultures in the West. Supporters of a football team can behave in the same manner. They wager money on their team, even if they know it is unlikely that the team will win against a superior opponent. The motivation to gamble is not primarily to win money but to show support to one's team. Placing a bet is also a social performance addressed to the team's other supporters. It has the same function as wearing the team's colors or scarves. It presents an opportunity to show that the bettor belongs to the same fan community with the other supporters. The size of the bet expresses the depth of this involvement rather than the expectation of monetary gain. If the team wins against all odds, the winnings can be considerable. All those supporters who gambled experience a double victory. These victories are not celebrated alone, but with the other fans. After the match, they gather in the corner pub to relive the event again. Those who won money are eager to offer drinks to their mates. This, again, is a social performance to cultivate community. As with the size of the bet, the amount of winnings consumed with fellow supporters expresses the depth of involvement in the community.

Fighting cocks and sports teams engage with each other regardless of the actions of bettors. Those who gamble cannot directly influence the course of the encounter. This is true of most of the gambling games. After placing their bets, gamblers can only wait for the outcome. However, by betting, they can experience deeper involvement before, during, and after the game than without doing so. Bets work as symbols of identities and the size of the bet measures directly how much of themselves gamblers invest in the game. Bets make gamblers feel as if they themselves are participants—insiders—in the game, not only outside observers. Especially during the game, when stakes are high and the final result is just about to be confirmed, gamblers can experience deep immersion. They observe only those things that are relevant to the game and shut out everything else. Momentarily the gambler becomes one with the fighting cock, the football team, or the roulette ball—and with the community the game represents.

Most of the traditional gambling games (e.g., roulette, blackjack, and sports betting) are played against the game operator who has a mathematical benefit, the 'house edge', that guarantees winning in the long run. Social interaction between players is not necessary nor does it have an effect on the outcome of the game. Nevertheless, gambling often takes place in social situations: around the same table, in spectator stands, or otherwise next to other gamblers within talking-distance even if they are playing separate games. Those

situations enable these individuals to start building social relationships and a sense of togetherness. If they identify themselves as members of a gambler community, the games they play will work as representations of that community.

Gambling and other game-related activities are deeply connected with the players' identity work, which takes place in the network of those communities to which the players belong. Any game, whether football match, roulette or poker, can represent these communities. Gamblers have formed their own subcultures which are situated in such playfields as casinos (Oldman 1978), racetracks (Abt et al. 1985), and online gaming sites (Farnsworth and Austrin 2010). On the other hand, gambling can be one form of socializing with friends, for example at a private poker table (Zurcher 1970) or, on a wider scale, a symbolic way of community building, as Geertz (1972) showed in his example from Bali. In that way, playing is always an opportunity to maintain social relations, reconstruct communal ties and validate one's identity. In this light the possibility of winning money is not the most important motivation to gamble and, in any case, other motivations are always connected with the activity (Aasved 2003). Even if social interaction between gamblers is not necessary in order to play, it is certainly meaningful in their experience of the game. However, there are also games that require social interaction as they proceed. Games of skill, in contrast to games of pure chance, have gained increasing popularity in the past decade. They have attracted a massive number of players especially online. This notable shift in gambling cultures in recent years is waiting for anthropologists' attention.

Online gambling has become more popular year by year. In the beginning, online gambling was almost completely an asocial activity (Griffiths 2003). Players could not even gather around the same games as in a brick and mortar casino, and interaction with other players was impossible during the game. But recently layers of sociality have been integrated into online gambling, as the Internet, in general, has evolved toward being a more social environment. These layers accommodate a variety of social rewards associated with gambling, both inside the game itself and in the discussion forums and other environments connected with it. Poker is a good example of this trend.

Poker players play against each other. Demand for social interaction is built into the game's mechanics, not least because the participants have an effect on the outcome of the game. In addition to trying to win money, the players compete against one another over who is the best player. Interaction between players continues beyond the game, in multiple poker-related online communities. Gambling and interaction in these communities are in a mutually beneficial relationship with each other. These communities offer, for example, information about poker strategy, coaching and links to good gaming sites. By joining these communities one can learn to be a better player. On the other hand, players can strengthen their status in the gamblers' community by sharing their game experiences in these forums.

Although poker is a game of skill, it contains an element of chance. Even skillful players lose sometimes. When this happens, they talk about the situation—the 'bad beats'—in players' online discussion forums and receive expressions of support and sympathy from their peers. Members of these game-related communities evaluate and rank each other according to how they behave before, during and after the game. Even if gamblers lose large sums of money in a game they can show valued character (see Goffman 1967)

by taking the defeat calmly and acting in a socially respected manner in the damaging situation. On the other hand, success is also valued so that the more one wins, the higher is one's status in the gamblers' community.

In poker money obviously measures how good the player is. But it is not the economic value of money s/he pursues. In games of skill money represents social rewards. Money equals points in the competition between players. The economic value of money is actualized only if one permanently exits the gamblers' community. Until then the gambler tries to earn those social rewards which are valued in that community. In this world the demonstrated capacity to make 'big money' or to earn points, to climb to the top in ranking lists, to be talked about in relevant forums or in the media, or the forming of new friendships, are deemed more valuable than the actual money earned by gambling.

Gambling is yet another activity never detached from its socio-cultural framework. Its social rewards depend on the participants' communities and are worthless if not valued by peers. Acknowledged membership matters most, and all other rewards, including money, are merely evidence and symbols of that membership. All this should sound familiar to anthropologists, who should revisit their classics and be swift to take a close look at online gambling.

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