

---

# Center for Gaming Research

## Occasional Paper Series

---

University Libraries

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

### COMPARING THE PROFESSIONALIZATION OF PRO GAMBLERS AND PRO VIDEO GAME PLAYERS

*Mark Johnson*

**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the lives and practices of professional gamblers and professional video game players. Although both sets of individuals earn their incomes through games and other broadly “playful” practices, the work identifies four significant differences in their careers and what the “everyday” of these individuals looks like. Firstly, in terms of the nature of “skill” required to progress in these careers, and how these players reflect on and understand their own skill; secondly, the role of money and “money management” in their lives, and the different rhythms of financial gain, and potentially loss; thirdly, the observation that whereas almost all professional video game players pursue a single game to a high level, professional gamblers generally pursue many games, a reflection of the different economic superstructures surrounding the two practices; and fourthly, differences in working hours and freedom, where professional gamblers live a life of flexibility and variation, whilst those of eSports players are regimented and highly structured. It shows that although both are professional game-players, there is wide divergence in this experiences, caused by the entanglement of external factors such as skill, luck, risk, legality, and technology, in this practices. The paper concludes by recommending future research into these elements and how they intersect with gameplay, in order to future understand the lives of these most skilled game-playing individuals.

**Keywords:** Professional gambling, professional gaming, gambling, video games, play, labour

**Preferred Citation:** Mark Johnson. “Comparing the Professionalization of Pro Gamblers and Pro Video Game Players.” Occasional Paper Series, 40. Las Vegas: Center for Gaming Research, UNLV University Libraries, 2017.

#### **Introduction**

Although it is difficult to trace the earliest era of professional gambling activity—understood here as gambling which provides the primary or entire source of income for an individual to live off—professional gamblers have long been central to the cultural mythos

of gambling practice (Hayano, 1984). However, by its nature—in casinos and card rooms, private clubs, in homes, on golf courses—the actual *practice* of the professional gambler is rarely noted through any formal means. It is instead recorded and reproduced through word-of-mouth, creating stories that circulate widely

but, in some cases, run the risk of losing their original veracity the further from the gambler in question they drift. Equally, when so many stories feature significant losses, or cheating, or other practices gamblers might not want to own up to or otherwise be associated with, it is easy to see how the lines between the actual practice of pro gamblers and the cultural imagination surrounding them might diverge. What does a professional gambler actually *do* on their path to becoming a professional gambler, and what challenges do they face? What practices, beyond their obvious skill at gambling *per se*, mark them out as being “professional” material?

More recently than professional gambling is the rise of professional *video game play*, known as “electronic sports” or more commonly “esports.” Such competitions are played both online, and physically in stadium venues, which can sell out to crowds of as high as forty thousand concurrent attendees (Evans, 2014). At least tens of millions of people now view esports events (Elder, 2017), and although it is hard to precisely estimate due to ambiguity over the nature of a “professional,” there are hundreds of professional gamers from all around the world, competing in a wide range of genres and games. Whereas the lives of professional gamblers are more covert, the lives of professional gamers have been extensively recorded, as a result of some key differences which create a difference in visibility. The focus of professional gamers on *tournaments* and formal competitions, the grouping of players into *teams*, and the fact that practice for major tournaments generally takes place online in public gaming spaces where anyone can spectate, all make pro-gamers highly visible. Equally, professional gamers depend in large part on the sponsorships and endorsements that come from maintaining a highly-visible public profile. Despite this visibility and significant recent scholarly and popular attention, however, the practices of esports players have not been contextualised in comparison to other professional play practices: is becoming an esports player comparable to becoming a professional gambler? To what extent do different ecosystems of play, income, and corporate interest affect their lives? What different ways are “game skill” mobilised?

In this paper I therefore ask: what does it take to become a professional gambler; what does it take to become a professional video game player; how are the two different or comparable; and what, in a broader sense, can we learn from comparing these practices of playing games as one’s source of income? I do this by a close examination of seventeen books from the UNLV

Special Collections addressing the lives and practices of professional gamblers, with some books focused on one individual, and others focused on many or the practice as a whole. For comparison with esports, I then draw on a year’s worth of ethnographic, video analytic, and interview-based research data on esports players and other actors in the esports ecosystem. This paper seeks to open up the differences in the experiences of game professionalization to scholarly consideration, and ask what we can learn about play and work through examining these individuals. I am therefore interested here both in the practices of these players, but also how these practices have been reified, transformed into discourse, and themselves become part of the professional gambler mythology. The paper therefore now explores four main points of divergence identified during this research—the “skills” required to become a professional, the challenges of modalities of handling money, broad or narrow gameplay abilities, and working hours and freedom.

### Skills of the trade

Professional gamblers define themselves first and foremost by their skills, specifically at navigating games with strong elements of unpredictability (Johnson, 2018) and luck. Much of the appeal of gambling for these players lies in the “prospect of pitting their skills and their courage and their experience against the best [other gamblers]” (Smith, 1982:9). Describing a famous duel between Johnny Moss and Nick the Greek, Jenkins argues that these players “[fight] for the distinction of being the best,” getting “nourishment” from action and competition, and that the subtlest play of their “art” could only be understood by gambling’s most “devoted practitioners” (1981:3,ii). Nick the Greek, we are told, “was always willing to bet on any game in which he believed his courage, skill, and intelligence might prevail against the fates” (Thackrey, 1984:12), emphasising the dichotomy between skill and luck and the ability for the skills of the successful gambler to overcome some, if not all, of the unpredictable elements of their practice. Similarly, another famous gambler, Brian Zembic, was known for pursuing “anything where his skill gives him the edge,” or where his “superior talent or knowledge makes him the favourite” (Konik, 1999:6). Despite the unpredictability inherent to its form, gambling is therefore seen as a true meritocracy for the professional or aspiring-professional: games become the “ultimate contest: the individual against the world” (Thackrey, 1984), and gambling through such games “is the only

profession in the world in which a person stands entirely on his own merits” (Moore & Darring, 1992:42). Strong discourses of individualism suggest that the gambler is a “self-made” individual; gamblers in turn rarely play with team mates in any context, reinforcing this focus on the skills and abilities of the specific gambler. As a result of this personal ability and the ideological associations alongside the attendant individualism it heralds, it has been argued that the “everyman” consequently desires the skills of these gamblers (Ellison, 1998:52), one of the reasons why the professional gambler has the allure it does in popular media. Professional gambling seems to offer the potential for self-emancipation and self-efficacy not through climbing the career ladder or working for others, but simply through one’s innate talents. Interestingly, however, due to the complexity of most gambling games, and the number of elements upon which the unfolding play of that game is causally contingent, it has been acknowledged that a “bettor will never reach the point where they know everything there is to know about any particular game” (Moody, 2013:110), and yet they must be able to consistently win. Consequently, a *professional* gambler “is the one for whom the game is not a gamble, but rather as near to a sure thing as he can make it” (Barron, 1962:60), but this information is always incomplete, and the role of short-term chance will inevitably, and permanently, remain. Deep skill at gambling games is considered essential to the success of a professional gambler, something innate and something which reflects positively on the character and abilities of the individual, but remains inevitably contingent on the navigation of unpredictable form of play.

Beyond high ability at the games one plays and the ability to simultaneously navigate the attendant uncertainty (the luck) and yet compete with the very best (the skill), it is also important to note the roles assigned to both *cunning* and *deception* in the skilled arsenal of the professional gambler. Although of course deception is integral to games of bluffing such as poker, the importance of these two skills extend far beyond the formal play of gambling games themselves. Ian Andersen discusses a range of techniques for disguising one’s abilities at the blackjack table—chips should be stacked poorly instead of neatly, one should always walk straight to a table instead of inspecting it (which implies one is examining the current card count), one should be friendly to the dealers and make conversation (1976:32), and one should disguise oneself as a rich but unskilled high-roller, act excited like an amateur

player when things go well, and even potentially make deliberately losing plays from time to time (1976:37-50). The precariousness and uncertainty of the career choice, and one’s constantly evolving “arms race” competition with casinos, other players, or both, means that if the professional gambler “were not cunning, he couldn’t survive, because he has only his wits to earn a living with” (Moore & Darring, 1992:70). This also extends to the ability to not just trick casinos and find good games, but also potentially to “hustle” other players by misrepresenting one’s skills in other ways (Stowers, 1968). These are skills distinct to the professional gambler which, as we shall see, the professional gamer does not share; these are skills beyond the formal fabrics of the games themselves which enables the gambler to play in the best situations, play for longer, maximise the value one gains from profitable bets, and navigate a world where one’s practice is sometimes contentious, sometimes disallowed, and rarely practiced in formal settings.

By contrast, skills in esports take on a very different form. Most centrally, esports games—with the perhaps singular exception of *Hearthstone* (2014)—require extremely high levels of physical reflex, coordination, and responses times in their players. These response times are fractions of a second, equivalent to those of professional fighter pilots (Russell, 2010), and are “trained” (Witkowski, 2013) and “drilled” (Ferrari, 2013) into players through intense and consistent practice. Although naturally some forms of gambling require physical reflex abilities—most obviously golf, pool, and some proposition bets, depending on the nature of the bet—this emphasis on physical requirements is quite distinctive, for the lives of the majority of professional gamblers (broadly understood) entail slow, deliberate actions, such as the moving of cards, the placing of bets, the pressing of buttons. We can also perceive a clear difference in the social interactions present: many esports games are team games and many esports players (even for individual one-versus-one games) are part of larger esports teams which provide a measure of stability, financial support, and so forth. Much of “skill” of course remains in the player’s own abilities, but much of the social skill for esports players entails working *with* one’s colleagues rather than *against* one’s betting opponents, for teamwork and the ability to rapidly transmit and process information to and from one’s teammates is essential to success. Lastly, the value of deception and cunning as skills is severely reduced in esports, almost to the point of irrelevance. One is never

playing “against the house” so one need not hide one’s abilities; esports players are highly visible and therefore masking one’s skills will be rapidly discovered; one need not develop skill in seeking out the best games, because the overwhelming majority of esports players’ income comes from formal tournaments scheduled long in advance, or from ongoing sponsorship money contingent on one’s performances in those same tournaments. Equally, whereas hustling—a practice that brushes up against “cheating,” depending on one’s definition—is acknowledged as a route to success for professional gamblers, anything that might resemble cheating is a guaranteed path to a finished career in esports; this, in turn, also translates into a greater emphasis on overt skill instead of covert skill.

### The handling and meaning of money

Central to gamblers’ understanding of money, meanwhile, is as a means of *keeping score*. Don Jenkins argues that gambling at a professional level involves the exchange of large amounts of currency, what is regularly a “lot of money to the outside world,” but to gamblers, “it’s more simply a way of keeping score” in a “persistent desire to the labelled the best of the best” (1981:i). This is echoed by Backgammon professional Mike Svobodny, who argues that money is “how you keep score as a gambler, really” (Munchkin, 2002:147). An interesting perspective on this currency-based score-keeping is argued by Joseph Buchdahl, who suggests that gambling is *fundamentally* about the money (2016:58); however, I would suggest other comments imply a divide between money as a unit of financial trade, and money as a *number* with strong cultural and ideological associations, but not necessarily tethered to its exchange-value. Either way, however, money for professional gamblers is intimately tied to notions of score-keeping.

In turn, money is also seen as an element of *control* and *discipline* through the concept of “money management,” which is to say preventing one’s losses from being too severe and always playing within one’s means. This practice is seen as crucial—not just for score, for the discursive presentation of quantified gaming ability—but for success, as well as pride, in one’s gambling endeavours. Svobodny argues that “being a gambler isn’t secure or stable. It’s the antithesis of those things” (Munchkin, 2002:135); consequently, one must manage one’s money carefully to reduce, if never completely eliminate, these inherent sources of uncertainty. Mark

Blade agrees that bankroll management is key to success (2005:6-7), just as Andersen argues that “successful gamblers manage money skilfully” (1976:51), presenting this as a central *skill* which must be learned, not just something to be observed and practiced. Numerous books on gambling such as that by Moody (2013:15-22) consequently devote significant sections of their works to exploring money management in both practice and theory; most striking, however, is the commentary of H R David. He states that “if gambling is to be a business, it must have all the accoutrements of any other successful enterprise”—one requires capital, good decision-making, “quick thinking, a certain ruthlessness,” and most centrally the “ability to keep a clear head and to exercise willpower” (1963:5). The managing of money is therefore understood as something with symbolic value through the act of keeping score, but also an element which—given the nature of the *gambler’s* work—must be carefully controlled.

In this final point we see the third dimension of money for professional gambler practices, which is the role of money as something to be *lost* through error, not just gained through ability, if one’s money management techniques are poor. Even professional gamblers earning reliable—if irregular—incomes through games of skill routinely struggle with losing those same winnings back in games of pure luck. As Raymond Smith puts it, “the wise poker professionals have learned to keep away from the casino games of chance” (Smith, 1982:19), and this appears to be reflected in the experiences of many. Moore & Darring (1992:38) describe successfully making money at gin rummy, and then losing it back at dice and sports betting; Michael Konik relates tales of skilled gamblers who were unable to handle well money they earned, subsequently losing it back on horses and sports betting (1999:96). Mark Blade stresses that for success in professional card-game play, it is crucial to have a “distaste for gambling” (2005:21), which in this context means betting on games of luck, and that gambling problems ruin numerous gamblers who might, otherwise, be promising (2005:225). On one level it is perhaps surprising that many professional gamblers struggle with “gambling away” the winnings they have acquired through their superior skill (which can take many forms)—we understand these players as being deeply skilled in gambling practice, as understanding odds, the psychology of their opponents, where they can and cannot squeeze out a profit—and yet in this regard, many have struggled to separate profit-making gambling from loss-making gambling, and have

come to resemble, in their losing hours, a problem or irresponsible gambler. On another, however, these are people deeply immersed in gambling practice and the constant play of financial unpredictability; and individuals *used to* their abilities finding them profits, and finding them profits can only a tiny fraction of individuals can perceive or appreciate. From these perspectives, it is perhaps not surprising to find many professional gamblers losing much of their money back to the house, or other players, whether they realise these will be long-term losers, or believe—incorrectly—in their own ability to achieve profit in these domains.

However, the experiences of professional esports players in financial matters are quite different, in three key ways. Firstly, esports players are not traditionally exposed to gambling any more than any other young person; indeed, given the wide demographic differences between esports players and “problem” gamblers, we might reasonably suggest that esports players are, if anything, less likely to be exposed to gambling than the average young person. Secondly, the acquisition of money by esports players is certainly not *regular* by the standards of a traditional profession, but is likely more regular than that of the professional gambler: the schedules of esports tournaments are known in advance, training schedules are consequently adjusted, and expectations and assumptions about future winnings can be developed. By contrast, with the exception of scheduled poker tournaments, the income of professional gamblers is erratic and dependent on a range of contingent factors which are partly, or entirely, unpredictable: when “good games” are running, when a “mark” comes to town, when a particular bet presents itself, and so forth. Thirdly, some esports players work in teams replete with managers and coaches and other professionals with experience in money management, especially valuable when many esports players are very young, and might lack practical knowledge of the “real world”. By contrast, professional gamblers are both highly individualistic and have to manage their own affairs and finances, and subsist in large part precisely on their knowledge of the “real world”—of the legality of what they do, of human psychology, investment, travel, how casinos and other companies function, and so forth. These the different contextual elements have led to quite different experiences of *finances* for aspirant gamblers and gamers; professional gamblers struggle with all aspects of money management, whilst money management for professional gamers is a far simpler—if nevertheless, especially when establishing one’s

career, precarious—matter. The concept of keeping *score* through money, meanwhile, is quite alien to the esports player. Although profit is of course integral to their practice, few esports players define themselves according to income as a metric for achievement. They are concerned instead with tournaments won, finals reached, their ratios of wins and losses against other top players or teams, and so forth. The only place where income is deployed discursively by esports players tends to be in terms of the largest single win earned by a player or team, which itself is primarily indicative of their *placement* in a tournament of likely high *status*, rather than the number itself. Money management is consequently a point of strong divergence between professional gamblers and professional video game players; although the income is each is unpredictable to a greater or lesser extent, and both subsist on the back of their game-playing skills, their abilities to obtain and retain money, manage money, and the rhythm with which they profit, differ significantly.

### How many games to play?

The third crucial difference comes in *specialisation*. Professional gamblers of almost all strikes are known for their ability to play a range of games to a high level. Don Jenkins in his biography of poker player Johnny Moss emphasises regularly the importance of being able to play any game, and being able to look for any edge, in Moss’ career and in the lives of professional gamblers more generally (1981:90-91,149,157,208). Mike Caro, writing of poker player Bobby Baldwin, also stresses that being able to play all poker games (1979:5), and consequently being an all-around player (1979:197), is highly desirable. Doyle Brunson echoes these perspectives (Smith, 1982:7), arguing that “the true expert must be able to play a wide variety of poker games” (Brunson, 1984:75), and that “superstars shift gears” (1984:109), being able to rapidly adapt to any situation that might offer a profitable gamble or wager. This is also the case for those outside of poker; many professional gamblers play many different kinds of games both within and beyond the category of card games (Munchkin, 2002:xiii), such as “hustlers” or professional “proposition bettors”. For example, “Titanic” Thompson’s skill as one of the most successful hustlers of all time was largely contingent on his “slick abilities at virtually any game of chance” (Stowers, 1968:59), and was always “ready to gamble with anybody on anything” (1982:64). Of course, there are some professional gamblers who are known for only a single game—such as finding winning strategies

on slot machines, or video poker, or specialising in a single form of physical poker—but these individuals are rarities, not the norm. This requirement to play all games makes sense in a professional economic system whose navigation is based, as we have seen, on flexibility, on adaptability, and an ability to seek out the best possible games—for one never knows when the next best game might appear, and one wants to be in the strongest possible position to profit from that game when and where it does happen.

However, the situation is profoundly different within the domain of esports. There are currently almost no world-class esports players who play more than one game at a level where they are capable of earning an income. There are a very small number of players who have transitioned from an esports video game into professional poker play—such as Bertrand “Elky” GrosPELLIER, once one of the strongest western *StarCraft* players, and now a highly successful professional poker player with over \$13,000,000 in gross lifetime earnings—but these are extremely rare; there are also a small number of “fighting game” players at a top competitive level in several games. In all other cases, however, players play their single game of choice at an extremely high level, and from this ability, they navigate the competitive ecosystem of esports and earn their living. The root cause of this difference lies in the observation that professional gamblers must possess *relative* skill when weighed against whatever individual, individuals or corporation they are playing against at the time, whilst professional video game players must possess *absolute* skill, for—outside of occasional “money matches,” akin to gambling proposition bets—profit can only be made by winning or placing highly in tournaments at a national, or ideally international, level. In these tournaments, it is crucial to note that prize money is disproportionately distributed to the eventual winner, even in tournaments with thousands of entrants, and to a lesser extent to those who finish close behind. An indicative example is the *Super Smash Brothers Melee* (2001) tournament at the 2016 “EVO” fighting game event. The tournament saw 2,372 entrants, each paying \$10 to enter, for a total prize pool of \$23,720. Of these two and half thousand entrants, the players who finished in 7th—reaching the top 0.29% of the field—received \$237.20, whilst the player who finished in first place—only six places higher, the top 0.04% of the field—received \$14,232, *sixty* times as much. This means that not just must one be one of the best in the world, but being *the* best in the world pays

*far* higher than even being second best. For esports players there is therefore no professional reason to cultivate skills in other games by “wasting” what might otherwise be time spent training in their primary game; being the world’s best in one game, and unable to play any others, pays far more than being in the world top-10 for two, three, or even half a dozen games. These differences in the breadth and depth of playing skill for professional gamblers and video game players therefore reflect the broader superstructure of profitability in their respective domains; professional gamblers do thrive on the cultivation of their skill, but that skill is always contextual, always directed to specific individuals or bodies at any given time; for the esports player, that skill is relative to *all* other players simultaneously, and must reach the highest possible peak if meaningful amounts of money are to be made.

### Working hours and freedom

The fourth and final distinction lies in the everyday scheduling and navigating of time and space for these two kinds of players. What emerges most strongly for professional gamblers is the profound flexibility of working hours and working locations, which is valorised both positively and negatively in this literature. In the first case, poker player Doyle Brunson argues that “poker playing is a great way to live. You don’t have to answer to anybody. You don’t have a boss. You don’t have any set hours. *I can’t imagine a better life*” (2002:293, emphasis mine). Similarly, professional poker player Chip Reese states “I get up every day and say, ‘What am I going to play today?’. It’s not like I’m going to work” (2002:40). R. D. Ellison concurs that when one is a professional gambler, “your workday might be over by noon or it might not begin until midnight. Your call. You have complete control over your life and how you spend your time. You do what you want, where you want and when” (1998:52). Professional gamblers praise the freedom their career choice offers them, emphasising the ability to direct one’s time according purely to one’s whims and the lack of a formal structure or formal hierarchy. However, this same flexibility, so freeing and emancipating, is not without its issues. Professional gambling is a career of inconsistent income (Blade, 2005:213), and despite the flexibility of the practice, “gambling professionally [...] is repetitious and petty, and monotonous as hell” (Ellison, 1998:4), with the majority of players “grinding” out livings slowly but surely. In many cases, this doesn’t just mean flexible hours in terms of times of play, but long hours

in terms of *length* of play: in a famous game of poker between Johnny Moss and Nick the Greek, for example, play stretched on so long that “at any point during the game, neither man could have told, with certainty, if it were day or night outside” (Jenkins, 1981:1). When immersed in the zone of gambling time “becomes meaningless for the gambler,” who must “adjust his schedule to fit his player partner” (Moore & Darring, 1992:47). The freedom of time is not just a wide variety in when one *chooses* to play, but also variation in when players *must* play if they are to procure their income. This variation also applies to *place* as well as time. Most professional gambling involves a lot of travel (Blade, 2005:212), the need to adapt to new countries and new casinos and new high-rolling players in pursuit of the best games (May, 2000:3), and as a whole, the “gambler’s work is performed in places we don’t associate with work—in bars, pool rooms, at card tables, in private homes” (Moore & Darring, 1992:44-45), not just the formal context of casinos. Existing flexibility is further compounded because “different games and personality traits lead to very different working styles” (Munchkin, 2002:xiii), with the everyday lives and practices of any two professional gamblers, even those in the same games and working in nominally the same social or cultural contexts, can be profoundly different. In summary, therefore, the locations and timings in which professional gamblers carry out their trade tend to be highly informal, highly inflexible, and highly variable.

The working hours and locations of professional video game players, on the other hand, display a striking level of regimentation. Many esports players live in “team houses,” residential locations where all or many players on a given team live and practice together (Scholz, 2011); these team houses are famous for the strictness of their schedules and the long hours players must train (Bago, 2016). These team houses function to reduce the temporal and spatial variation in esports players’ lives down to an absolute minimum, understood as being implicitly desirable for the cultivation of a desirable work ethic, and consequently the highest level of skill. Even those who do not live in these contexts are nevertheless known to generally keep comparably rigorous schedules. Equally, as we have seen, professional gamblers can ply their trade in a wide range of locations, and potentially—if one is primarily a proposition bettor or hustler—effectively anywhere. By contrast, outside of *training*, esports players will only actually perform their practiced abilities in the contexts of specific tournaments, whose times and places are

known at least months, and sometimes over a year, in advance. Professional gamblers practice at the same time as playing for real, and might do so anywhere, any time; professional gamers practice in a separate context to their “serious” play, and both practice and competition take place within clearly delineated spatiotemporal settings. Working hours and locations are therefore strongly influenced by the economic structure of competition, and by the presence or absence of corporate sponsors in the area who expect certain activities from their players; for esports players there is little data on their experiences of team houses, but for professional gamblers, it is clear that the structuring of their lives in the manner described here can be both a highly positive and a highly negative element of their practice.

## Discussion

The processes of transitioning from an amateur to a professional gambler, or from an amateur to professional video game player, are challenging, complex, demanding, and precarious. They require not just the cultivation of high-level skill in one’s chosen profession, although this is obviously central to the practices and lives of these individuals, but also the navigation of two very different ecosystems and superstructures. In this paper I have sought to begin an initial exploration of these divergent professional game playing paths, in terms of concepts and varieties of skill, the role of money, the kinds of games played, and the structure of the working day.

In terms of skill, professional gamblers pride themselves on their skills, their ability to find and execute profitable bets and to do so on their own, consequently adopting a position of stark individualism and an “against the world” mentality. However, they also acknowledge the fundamental unpredictability at the core of their vocation which must be navigated through capable play; equally, many also utilise deception as a key skill, whether against individuals, or against the house, as well as their ability at games in a formal sense. Professional esports players, meanwhile, emphasise physical ability first and foremost, with the cultivation of incredible reflexes essential to their practice; they are also cooperative to their team-mates, whilst professional gamblers rarely if ever function as part of any kind of team. Whereas professional gamblers must sometimes act in a covert manner, esports players profit from *visibility*, and thus refrain from any equivalent practices; indeed, covert activities run the risk of being accused of cheating,

from which there is almost no return. In terms of money, professional gamblers adopt a “score-keeping” mentality to their profits; winnings are markers of ability. In turn, the concept of money management is crucial for reducing losses and maintaining one’s wins and losses on a relatively steady keel, and is identified by many as central to the life of a successful gambler; equally, however, many professional gamblers do *not* display this trait, instead gambling away on games of luck what they had previously won in games of skill. I identified several initial hypotheses to explain this phenomenon, but it merits further consideration. Players of esports games, meanwhile, rarely if ever display gambling issues, have teams and managers to help them managing their money, and are unconcerned by profit as a merit of score; for these players, it is not appropriate to say that money is “secondary,” but income and the discursive value of that income are both thought about, and reflected on, far less.

When it comes to the games they play, we saw a stark divide between the depth and breadth of gaming ability these players cultivate. Professional gamblers, obliged to find every angle and every moment that might lead to profit, almost always seek to become skilled in as wide a range of games as possible, even if one is not *the* best in the world at any of them. By contrast, esports players, obliged to secure regular high finishes in national or international tournaments with hundreds or even thousands of players, pursue the highest possible ability in *one* game, understanding the potential for profit being higher than slightly lower levels of skill, even in a far greater range of games. In terms of working hours and working routines, lastly, another clear difference can be seen. Professional gamblers display tremendous flexibility and adaptability in where they play—houses, casinos, clubs, other countries, often at a moment’s notice—and also when they play—days, evenings, nights, or multiple days without sleeping. Gamblers identified this as both desirable and undesirable in a number of ways, with all agreeing this irregular spatiotemporal ordering of their lives was central to being a professional gambler, but without clear consensus about the positivity or negativity of this aspect. Professional video game players, meanwhile, both train and play “for real” in very clear, explicitly, planned in advance, formal, rigid settings, whether regular training in a team house for long hours, or playing in a tournament whose specifics and times and dates were known, and therefore prepared for, long in advance.

Although esports has captured the imagination and the public eye in recent years, professional gameplay has a much longer history, through professional gambling—and, indeed, this form of professional play continues into the present day. Both are centred around the act of playing games as one’s income, but show us much about how economic systems, contexts, and entanglements with elements such as corporate interests, technology, the formal structures of games, and more, affect their play. I believe there is much of value to both game studies and gambling studies that might be gained from continued explorations of this comparison, in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the practices of professional game-players of all stripes, and how these are shaped by the broader superstructures of social, political and economic elements within which they exist.



## Works Cited

- Andersen, I. (1976), *Turning the Tables on Las Vegas*. NY: Vanguard Press.
- Bago, J. P. (2016), 'Dispelling the Myth of the Korean Gaming House', *esports Inquirer*, available at <http://esports.inquirer.net/13920/dispelling-the-myth-of-the-korean-gaming-house-what-lessons-the-philippine-esports-industry-can-learn-from-our-korean-overlords>
- Barron, M. (1962), *A Professional Gambler tells how to win*. NY: Belmont Books.
- Blade, M. (2005), *Professional Poker*. Brownfield Publishing.
- Brunson, D. (1984), *According to Doyle*, Hollywood, California: Gambling Times.
- Buchdahl, J. (2016), *Squares and Sharps, Suckers and Sharks: The Science, Psychology & Philosophy of Gambling*, Herts UK: Oldcastle Books.
- Caro, M. (1979), *Bobby Baldwin's Winning Poker Secrets*. Las Vegas, NV: B & G Publishing.
- David, H. R. (1963), *How to make a living by gambling*, President Books.
- Ellison, R. D. (1998), *Gamble to Win*. Secaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group.
- Evans, S. (2014), 'League of Legends gaming final fills Seoul stadium', *BBC News*, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-29684635>
- Ferrari, S. (2013) 'eSport and the Human Body: Foundation for a Popular Aesthetics'. Proceedings of DiGRA 2013: DeFragging Game Studies.
- Hayano, D. M. (1984), 'The professional gambler: fame, fortune and failure', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 474(1):157-167.
- Jenkins, D. (1981), *Johnny Moss: Poker's Finest Champion of Champions*. Odessa, TX: JM.
- Johnson, M. R. (Forthcoming, 2018), *The Unpredictability of Gameplay*. New York, London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Konik, M. (1999), *The man with the \$100,000 breasts and other gambling stories*. Las Vegas, NV: Huntington Press.
- May, J. (2000), *The Gambler's Guide to the World*. NY: Broadway Books.
- Moody, A. (2013), *Becoming a Winning Gambler*. North Charleston, SC: Createspace.
- Moore, N. M. & Darring, W. (1992), *The Crossroad*. Mobile, AL: Regency Press.
- Munchkin, R. W. (2002), *Gambling Wizards*. Las Vegas, NV: Huntington Press.
- Russell, K. (2010) 'Bedroom gamers turn professional'. BBC News. Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10218791>
- Scholz, T. M. (2011), 'New broadcasting ways in IPTV – the case of the Starcraft broadcasting scene', *World Media Economics & Management Conference*.
- Smith, R. (1982), *The Poker Kings of Las Vegas*, Dublin: Aherlow.
- Stowers, C. (1968), *The Unsinkable Titanic Thompson*. Burnet, Texas: Eakin Press.
- Thackrey, T. (1984), *Gambling Secrets of Nick the Greek*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
- Witkowski, E. (2013) 'Competition and Cooperation'. In: M J P Wolf and B Perron (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. New York: Routledge, 158-166.



---

# CENTER FOR GAMING RESEARCH

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

## Occasional Paper Series



### About the Author

Dr. Mark R Johnson is a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Computing at Goldsmiths College, University of London. His research focuses on the intersections between play and money, such as eSports, live streaming, gambling, fantasy sports, and so forth. His first monograph, 'The Unpredictability of Gameplay', is a Deleuzian analysis of gameplay unpredictability, and soon to be published by Bloomsbury Academic. Beyond his scholarly work he is also an independent game developer, former professional poker player, and regular freelance games writer, blogger, and podcaster.

### About the Occasional Paper Series

In 2010, the Center for Gaming Research launched an Occasional Paper Series that publishes brief studies of gambling and casinos with a policy and public-interest orientation.

These papers are generally between three and six-thousand words, written with the intent of informing the public discussion of gambling and casinos. Topics include gaming history, casino management, and studies in sociology, economics, and political science related to gambling.

Authors include faculty affiliated with the Center for Gaming Research, particularly Eadington Fellows. As part of their residency, fellows complete a paper for the series.

In June 2013, the UNLV Gaming Press published *Frontiers in Chance: Gaming Research Across the Disciplines*, a collection of many of the papers in the series. For more information about this book, please see <http://gamingpress.unlv.edu/>.

A full set of the papers are available at: <http://gaming.unlv.edu/papers.html>



## About the Center for Gaming Research

Founded in 1987, the Center for Gaming Research hosts scholars investigating a variety of subject areas. Located within Special Collections at UNLV's state-of-the-art Lied Library, its main resource is the Gamin Collection.

Many unique primary resources can be found only within the Collection. We preserve and make accessible company documents, state publications, and other important resources.

The Center's Eadington Fellow program, active since 2007, brings scholars from around the world to Las Vegas to perform research in Special Collections. Fellows use the Center's resources to further their study of gaming and become ambassadors for the Center and UNLV.

The Center is committed to providing support for scholarly inquiry into all aspects of gaming. We serve as an unparalleled resource for students, faculty, and independent scholars.

Students, faculty and community members interested in academically-oriented gaming research are welcome to use the collection and the resources of the Center.

---

Number 40 | July 2017  
Series Editor: David G. Schwartz

©2017 Center for Gaming Research  
University Libraries • University of Nevada, Las Vegas

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or reprinted without the prior permission of the Center for Gaming Research. The opinions represented in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of UNLV, its faculty, staff, administration, or benefactors.

For more information, please visit: <http://gaming.unlv.edu/>