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### CHRISTIANITY AND GAMBLING: AN INTRODUCTION

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**ABSTRACT:** Religions hold complex relations with games and, in particular, with gambling. The article focuses on Christianity. On the one hand, the history of this religion shows a tendency to condemn games as source of distraction from spiritual rectitude and to stigmatize gambling, above all, as opening to metaphysical randomness and, as a consequence, as challenge to the idea of divine omniscience. On the other hand, Christianity has also sought to reinterpret games, and even gambling, as possible occasion for moral improvement and as useful distraction from the hardship of monastic life. A theological perspective that reaches its peak in Thomas Aquinas, but has its roots in Aristotle's evaluation of playfulness, tends to suggest the need for eutropelia, meant as the citizens' virtue to appropriately have fun.

**Keywords:** Games; Gambling; Religions; Christianity; Moralization

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#### 1. Introduction: late medieval and early modern Christian attitudes towards games and gambling.<sup>1</sup>

The prevailing attitude of Christianity towards games and, particularly, towards gambling is, in general, disparaging. The mendicant orders were generally against any kind of game. Saint Bernardino of Siena<sup>2</sup> would condemn them with a vehemence that reminds one of present-day fundamentalists (Depaulis 2013: 115-36). In spectacular bonfires, he would burn not only female "vanities" but also games, such as chessboards, checkerboards, and, above all, cards, the new 'obsession' of early 15<sup>th</sup>-century players, for cards were increasingly diffused thanks to innovation in printing

techniques. During Lent of 1424, in particular, the Senese preacher pronounced a violent sermon entitled *Del peccato del giuoco* ["on the sin of gaming"], in which he declared that:

Play-cards are like multicolor copes [...]. There are swords to cut you into pieces, clubs to beat you up, coins for avarice, cups for drinkers, and the inebriation, and the gluttony, and the luxury in which games results.<sup>3</sup>

A famous painting by an anonymous artist, executed between 1465 and 1475 and currently at the *Historisches Museum* [history museum] of Bamberg, Germany, shows a

companion of Bernardino, Saint John of Capistrano<sup>4</sup> — who also delivered a sermon *De ludo* in 1452 — while he presides over the double bonfire of cosmetics and games (Fig. 1).

Another image, a woodcut print by Hans Leonhard Schäußelein,<sup>5</sup> originally included in the frontispiece of the *Vita Johannis Capistrani: Sermones eiusdem*, published in Augsburg in 1519, depicts the bonfire of games in an even more accurate manner (Fig 2).

Iacubus de Marchia (Giacomo della Marca),<sup>6</sup> another member of the Observant order, in his sermon *De ludo*, preached in 1460, would rhetorically ask: “Quis invenit ludum?” [who invented game?]; and, quoting John Chrysostom and Thomas Aquinas, he would reply: the devil (1978-82, 1: 190-205). And then he would rant on about games in an extraordinary homiletic invention, in which he would imagine a cathedral of the devil as gaming house (*baracterium*), where dies would replace relics, play-cards religious icons, the dealer table the altar, and where monastic cells would host as many kinds of games:

In the sixth room are six cells: in the first, *bini*; in the second one, *trenta per forza*; in the third one, *chi bada las*; in the fourth one, *imperiale*; in the fifth one, *a chi non piace la volta del compagno*; in the sixth one, *passa dece*. And these are all diabolical names.<sup>7</sup>

The text sounds ambiguous today, not only for it betrays an even too meticulous knowledge of the various games, but also because, in its metaphorical verve, it reveals the deepest ground of religions’ hostility toward games: the



Fig. 1: Anonymous. 1465-75. Saint John of Capistrano presides over the bonfire of vanities and games. Bamberg, Germania: Historisches Museum.

danger that believers might seize the ludic aspect of the sacred itself, the involuntary but consubstantial playfulness of every liturgy.

To this regard, late medieval and Renaissance Lenten and confession books are revealing, both because they witness to such stigmatization and because of the classificatory meticulousness that they often display in articulating the semantic field of game. The *Repertorium seu Interrogatorium sive Confessionale* [‘repertory’ or interrogation or confession handbook] (1516) by Mattia da Milano<sup>8</sup> or the *Summa de confessione cognominata pacificata* [compendium about confession also said ‘pacified’] (1518) by Pacifico da Novara<sup>9</sup>, another Observant friar, condemn games in relation to the Decalogue and to the capital sins (sanctifying festivities, stealing, desiring others’ properties, the sin of avarice, etc.).

## 2. Exceptions: attempts at ‘Christianizing’ games and gambling.

However, the more one focuses on early modernity, the more one finds exceptions in confession handbooks. Martín Azpilicueta,<sup>10</sup> an author cherished by the casuists and forerunner of classical economics, as well as (perhaps not fortuitously) champion of the theological legitimacy of interest loans, wrote in his *Manual de Confesores y Penitentes* [handbook of confessors and penitents], published in Coimbra in 1553, then in Italian translation in 1574,<sup>11</sup>



Fig. 2: Hans Leonhard Schäußelein. 1519. John of Capistrano presides over the bonfire of games. Frontispiece of *Vita Johannis Capistrani. Sermones eiusdem*, edited by Bernardino Confessor of the Monastery of Mariemay. Augsburg: Joannes Miller, 1519.



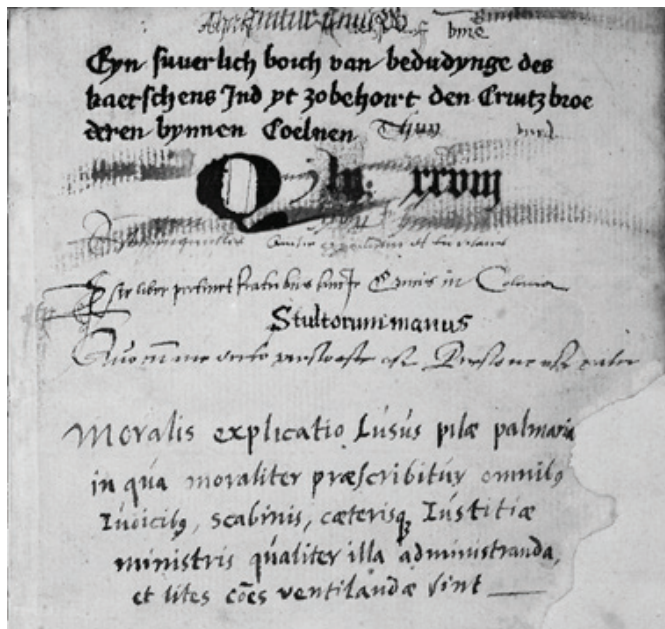


Fig. 3: Frontispiece of the manuscript *Eyn suuerlich boich van bedudynghe des kaetschens*. Historical archive of the city of Colonia. Microfilm Kö. S II 2

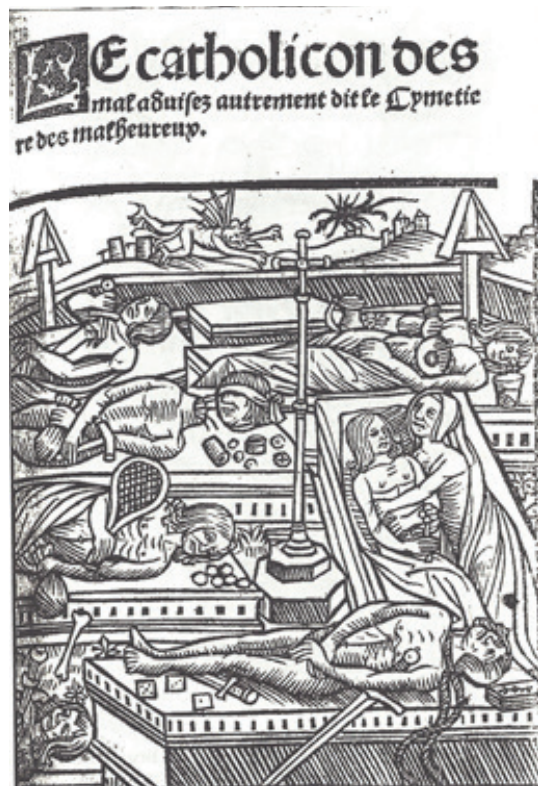


Fig. 4: Anonymous. *Le Cymetiere des malheureux*. C. 15th c. Woodcut print. Heiner Gillmeister's private collection. Published in Sonntag 2013: 167.

that “without committing a sin the clergyman and the friar can sometimes play even with dice and cards for reasonable purposes, such as reawakening or cheering up an ill companion, who would need such recreation”.<sup>12</sup> In any case, attempts at moralizing games are not uncommon in the history of Christianity.

The historical archives of the city of Colonia contain a manuscript in Rhenish Franconian dialect entitled *Eyn suuerlich boich van bedudynghe des kaetschens* (Fig. 3), literally, “A ponderous book on the meaning of tennis”. That is a translation, completed in 1450 by a member of the Order to the Holy Cross, of the famous Flemish text *Dat Kaetspel Ghemoralizeert* (1431) [moralized tennis], wherein the bailiff of Furnes, Jan van den Berghe,<sup>13</sup> would turn tennis into an allegory of fair justice.<sup>14</sup>

The problem at stake, indeed, was not the game itself, but gambling. The archive of Heiner Gillmeister, a specialist in the cultural history of tennis, contains a woodcut print of French provenience, entitled “*Le Cymetiere des malheureux*” [the cemetery of the miserable ones], where a tennis player lies with his racket in the right hand, while the left hand holds a little purse full of coins, similar to that which one finds in the typical iconography of Judas (Fig. 4).

In the terms of game theorist Roger Caillois, it is above all *alea*, that is, chance, to stir the hostility of Christianity. Already in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, a homily by pseudo-Cyprian, entitled *De aleatoribus*, is explicit about the matter: those who gamble forestall the advent of grace (Pseudo-Cipriano 2006). Nevertheless, also gambling games, and not only agonistic games, have given rise to attempt at Christian moralization. Already in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Wibold, the bishop of Cambrai,<sup>15</sup> invented a *Ludus regularis seu clericalis* [licit or clerical game], in which the dice's 56 possible numeric combinations were associated to a list of 56 virtues (Fig. 5).

The complete list can be found in the first book, chapter 88, of the *Chronicon Camaracense et Atrebatense* by Balericus Noviomensis<sup>16</sup> (1615). The erudite André Joseph Ghislain Leglay,<sup>17</sup> who proposes a comment of it in a note of Migne's *Patrologia* (134: 1007-14), reconstructs the very complex diagram that was to be used in the pious game (Fig. 6).

Moralization of hazard does not necessarily entail the invention of a new game, but often consists in the Christian interpretation of already existent games. That would concern also complete information games such as chess, whose playing would however sometimes involve gambling and the use of dice. In the *De laude novae militiae* [praise for the new militia] (IV, 7), Bernard of Clairvaux<sup>18</sup> had been peremptory: “*Detestantur aleas et scaccos*”<sup>19</sup> [chance games and chess are to be despised]. Nevertheless, around 1300, Jacopo da Cessole,<sup>20</sup> a native of Asti, Italy, and among the founders of the Dominican monastery of Savona, wrote the *Ludus scacchorum* [the game of chess] or *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium ac popularium super ludo scacchorum* [book on the customs of men and about the noble and more popular practices concerning chess] (1957). A collection of sermons, this work is comprised of four treatises. The first links the invention of game with a mythical pedagogy: the Persian philosopher Xerxes would have invented chess so as to encourage the irascible king Evil-Merodach, son of Nebuchadnezzar II, to patience; the second and the third treatises describe the virtues of the various chess pieces, divided into noble and popular ones;



<p>144 CHRON. CAMERAC. ET ATRER.                  ii. iii. vi. Patientia, x.                  ii. iii. v. Zelus, xi.                  ii. iii. vi. Paupertas, xii.                  ii. v. v. Lenitas, xii.                  ii. v. vi. Virginitas, xiii.                  ii. vi. vi. Reuerentia, xiiii.                  iii. iii. iii. Pietas, viiii.                  iii. iii. iii. Indulgentia, x.                  iii. iii. v. Oratio, xi.                  iii. iii. vi. Amor, xii.                  iii. iii. iiii. Iudicium, xi.                  iii. iii. v. Vigilantia, xii.                  iii. iii. iii. Mortificatio, xiiii.                  iii. v. v. Innocentia, xiiii.                  iii. v. vi. Contritio, xiiii.                  iii. vi. vi. Confessio, xv.                  iv. iv. iv. Maturitas, xii.                  iv. iv. v. Sollicitudo, xiiii.                  iv. iv. vi. Confidentia, xiv.                  iv. v. v. Intellectus, xiv.                  iv. v. vi. Sufpiratio, xv.                  iv. vi. vi. Pletus, xvi.                  v. v. v. Hilaritas, xv.                  v. v. vi. Compassio, xvi.                  v. vi. vi. Cōtinētia, xvii.                  vi. vi. vi. Humilitas, xviii                  dicitur mouet, uel flum uel terram, uel uirtutem                  propugnā de se profert. Itaque ponamus c.                  ritate</p>	<p>LIBER PRIMVS. 143                  Cleras Aelicē                  Lasuliter fors                  dicitur, hinc                  clemencia be-                  recitas, clem-                  nomibere: in-                  de clericis nūc-                  pantur, cōquid                  sint de forte Do-                  mini. Cāō Gra-                  cē, Latine regula.                  Ab eo Cano-                  nici, Regulares                  nōmīnāt. Er-                  go quia idē ca-                  nonicōnem a                  persūā &amp; se                  benedicentibus                  alicā reperta, at-                  que frāse uel                  tātā est) ut dis-                  cordiam, perui-                  ria catrag, uic-                  tia, clericos in-                  terdicti aleato-                  res fore, episcō                  condicet, ut re-                  lictū uirtutē exa-                  mī. v. Hofpitalitas. x.                  q. uir-</p>
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Fig. 5: List of virtues associated with possible combinations in dies games according to Wibold of Cambrai.

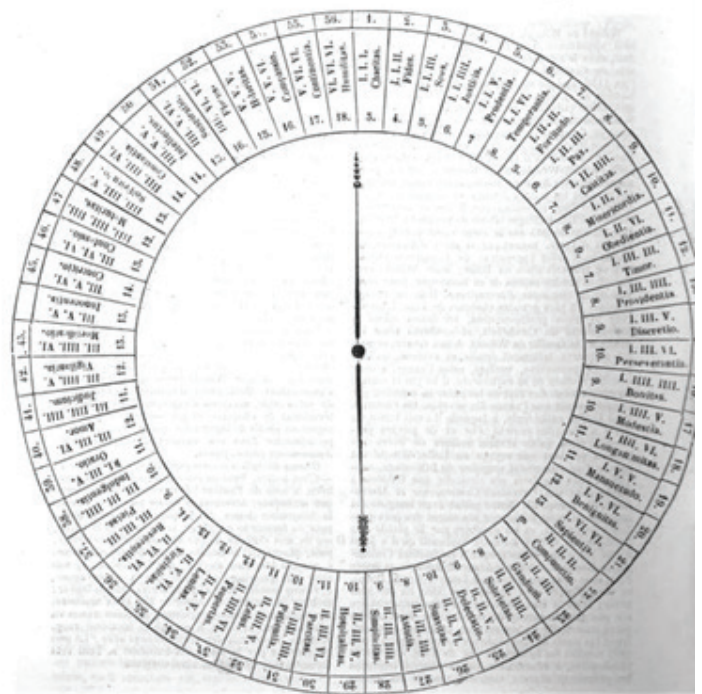


Fig. 6 Anonymous. Le Cymetiere des malheureux. C. 15th c. Woodcut print. Heiner Gillmeister's private collection. Published in Sonntag 2013: 167.

the fourth treatise turns the chessboard into a metaphor of the city and recommends relations and actions of the various pieces, providing a hundred exempla. The *Ludus scacchorum* gained enormous and international success and was often diffused together with lavish illustrations (Fig. 7).

In 1432, following the example of Jacopo da Cessole, the Dominican Ingold von Basel,<sup>21</sup> chaplain and reader of theology in Strasbourg, wrote the *Püchlein vun Guldin Spil* (1882), literally, the “booklet of the golden game”. In it, he would deal with the origin, the modalities, the dangers, and the possible virtuous usages of seven games: 1) chess; 2) board games with little discs (*Pretspil*); 3) dies games; 4) card games; 5) archery or other similar games; 6) dances; 7) musical games, that is, the *Saitenspiel*, i.e., playing string instruments. Ingold would indeed propose an articulation based on the semantics of medieval German, in which *Spiel* would designate, indeed, board games as well as dances as well as playing a musical instrument. The most interesting aspect of this treatise, however, lies in the fact that Ingold proposes a (pseudo-) reconstruction of the noble origin of each kind of game. Therefore, chess would have been invented by ancient and pagan sages such as Xerses or Philometus of Chaldea; board games would have been invented by Greeks in front of Troy; string instrument playing by King David, etc. These imaginary reconstructions were instrumental to propose the seven games as remedies to capital sins.

### 3. Conclusions: towards “eutrapelia”.

We could continue for a long time. The attitude of Christianity towards games is ambiguous because the role of the body, of the senses, of movement, of representation and of grace in Christianity is ambiguous, as it is perhaps the case also in other religions. But the semantic field of games is



Fig. 7: Illustration from Jacobus de Cessolis (Iacopo da Cessole). 1493. Libro di giuoco di scacchi intitolato de costumi deguomini [sic] & degli offitii de nobili. Firenze: per maestro Antonio Miscomini, 1493 adi primi di marzo. (An Italian translation from the Latin original).



Fig. 8: Little monk throwing a ball. *Summa theologiae*, Ms 1026, fol. 16r, Library of Angers, France. Quoted in Sonntag 2013: 269.

ambiguous too, as an ever more abundant literature emphasizes and investigates it. Competitive games can lead to violence and blasphemy, but also train the spirit and the body, as well as be a metaphor for the struggle between good and evil, God and devil: from the *ioca monachorum* to the rhetoric challenges, from jousting to tennis itself. Camouflage games can result in idolatry, yet sacred representations, processions, and effigies simulate the salient moments of Jesus's story even within the cathedrals. Vertiginous games distract the spirit, and Chrysostom already would state that, where the dance is, there is the devil, yet a literature and a paraliturgical costume flourish around the mystique of equilibrium as a metaphor of the state of grace. Finally, random games remind one of the dice of the Passion, open a void in the fabric of the divine will, and jeopardize the dialectic of arbitrariness and grace, yet they too are sometimes condoned, if they generate delight, if they awaken from the torpor of meditation, or if they teach mathematics, as an extensive literature indicates, from *De viribus quantitatis*<sup>22</sup> by Luca Pacioli<sup>23</sup> to the *Liber de ludo aleae*<sup>24</sup> by Girolamo Cardano<sup>25</sup>.

Thomas Aquinas towers, as usual, over the entirety of this dialectics. Inspired by Aristotle, in the *Summa* he argues very lucidly and at length about games, defending the thesis that “*ludus est necessarius ad conversationem humanae vitae*” (IIa-IIæ, q 168, A. 3 ad 3). The game, Tommaso concludes, is the rest of the soul. That was probably true for the amanuensis who, weary of his copyist work, adorned a page of the *Summa*, in a manuscript now kept in the Municipal

Library of Angers, with the graceful image of a ball-throwing monk (Ms. 1026), fol. 16r, Fig. 8).

Games for Thomas Aquinas are indeed not only lawful but also necessary, provided that “one takes care of three things”: that the pleasure of the soul is never sought in ugly or harmful deeds or words; that the soul never completely abandons its gravity; and that “entertainment is appropriate for the people, time, place and all the other due circumstances” (*ibidem*). Whoever in games respects these three admonitions pursues the virtue that, Thomas Aquinas underlines, already Aristotle in the *Nicomachean ethics* called “eutrapelia”, that is, the virtue of “knowing how to turn acts and words into a joke” (*Eth. Nic. II 7, 1108a 23 -24*).

In what it consists, exactly, this “eutrapelia” is, then, specified by Dante, who in turn refers to Thomas and Aristotle book IV of the *Convivium* (IV XVII 6):

The tenth [virtue] is called Eutrapelia, which moderates us when we joke appropriately. This virtue, therefore, that the Latins would call *iocunditas*, *comitas*, or better still *urbanitas*, consists in the ability to live in company, and to know how to enjoy the pleasure of being with others, in return offering to others a cordial and affectionate attitude.<sup>26</sup>

*Eutrapelia* and *urbanitas* are therefore two aspects of the same virtue. Being citizens and knowing how to play with dignity are two playful faces of the same coin. That is perhaps the best advice to be drawn from the past for anyone today reflecting on gambling and religion.



## Notes

- 1 Research in view of the writing of this paper was possible thanks to an Eadington Fellowship at The Center for Gaming Research at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (September 2017). I thank the Center, its Director Dr. David G. Schwartz and its staff for facilitating my perusal of the wonderful special collections of the Center's Library.
- 2 Massa Marittima, Italy, 8 September 1380 - Aquila, Italy, 20 May 1444.
- 3 "E piviali sono e naibi di molti colori [...]. Spade per farti tagliare a pezzi, bastoni per farti bastonare, denari per l'avarizia, coppe be' beitori, e ebrietà, e gola, e lussuria che il giuoco si tira dietro"; Bernardino of Siena (Saint) 1934: 435; trans. mine. Bernardino is obviously referring to the four suits of Italian cards.
- 4 Capestrano, Abruzzi, Kingdom of Naples, 24 June 1386 - Ilok, Syrmia, Kingdom of Croatia, 23 October 1456.
- 5 Nuremberg, 1480-1485 – Nördlingen, 1538 o 1540.
- 6 Montepandone, near Ascoli Piceno, Italy, 1393 – Naples, 28 November 1476.
- 7 "In sexta [stantia] sunt sex cellule: in prima al bini; in secunda a lo trenta per forza; in tertia o chi bada l'as; in quarta a lo imperiale; in quinta a chi non piace la volta del compagno; in sexta passa dece. Et omnia ista sunt nomina diabolica"; quoted in Depaulis 2013: 124; trans. mine.
- 8 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> c.; see Rizzi 2013: 104.
- 9 Cerano, near Novara, Italy, 1424 – before 14 June 1482.
- 10 Martín Azpilicueta Jaureguizar; Barásoain, Navarra, Spain, 13 December 1492 – Rome, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1586.
- 11 Italian translation by Friar Cola di Guglinisi of the Order of Saint Francis of Padua. Venice: Gabriele Giolito de' Ferrari, 1574.
- 12 "senza commetter peccato veniale il chierico può et anche il frate alcuna volta giuocare etiandio a dadi et a carte per cagioni ragionevoli, come è per risvegliarsi o per rallegrare il compagno infermo, che ha di questa ricreatione bisogno"; *ibidem*: 437, quoted in Rizzi 2013: 106.
- 13 1360, Handzame, current Belgium - 7 October 1439, Handzame, current Belgium.
- 14 Van den Berghe 1915; see Gillmeister 2013.
- 15 Died after 966.
- 16 Baldéric or Baudri de Cambrai (bishop of Noyon, Picardy, France and cantor in Théroutanne, near Calais, France), died 31 May 1112.
- 17 Arleux, near Calais, France, 1785 – Lille, 1836.
- 18 Fontaine-lès-Dijon, Burgundy, France, 1090 – Abbey of Clairvaux, 20 August 1153.
- 19 Bernardus Claraevallensis 1957-98, 3 (1962): 220; quoted also in Mehl 2013: 175, n. 26.
- 20 Cessole, near Asti, Italy, second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> c. – after 1322.
- 21 Died around 1450.
- 22 Written between 1499 and 1509. A transcription is in Pacioli 1997; see also Aceto 2013.
- 23 Borgo Sansepolcro, 1445 ca – Rome, 19 June 1517.
- 24 Written in 1560, published only in 1663.
- 25 Pavia, 24 September 1501 – Rome, 21 September 1576; a modern edition is in Cardano 2006.
- 26 La decima [virtù] si è chiamata Eutrapelia, la quale modera noi ne li sollazzi facendo, quelli usando debitamente. Questa virtù, dunque, che i Latini chiamavano iocunditas, comitas, o meglio ancora urbanitas, consiste nella capacità di vivere in compagnia, e nel saper godere debitamente del piacere di stare con gli altri, in cambio offrendo agli altri un atteggiamento cordiale e affettuoso."

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### About the Author

Massimo Leone is Professor of Semiotics, Cultural Semiotics, and Visual Semiotics at the Department of Philosophy, University of Turin, Italy and Director of the MA Program in Communication Studies at the same University. He has been visiting professors at several universities in the five continents.

Massimo Leone has single-authored eight books, edited more than thirty collective volumes, and published more than four hundred articles in semiotics, religious studies, and visual studies.

He is the chief editor of *Lexia*, the international Semiotic Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication, University of Turin, Italy (SCOPUS).

### 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.

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