MANAGEMENT OF THE SELF IN VIRTUAL WORK: SELF-ORGANISATION AND CONTROL AMONG PROFESSIONAL ONLINE POKER PLAYERS

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Abstract

This study is set in the broad context of the changing world of work that is characterised by the dissolution of full-time stable employment and the emergence of precarious, insecure forms of work (see e.g. Gorz, 1999, Hardt and Negri, 2005, Huws, 2016, Lorey, 2015, Ross, 2003, Ross, 2009, Smith, 2001, Standing, 2011). As a response to these labour market uncertainties a growing number of individuals are managing multiple areas of the self as part of their work or occupation. This trend has been termed 'the new worker-subjectivity' or 'the entrepreneurial self' that is formed through practices of self-management (Bührmann, 2005, Lorey, 2009). Despite increasing awareness of the emergence of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity, research into practices of self-management has only focused on occupational groups in formal work. Knowledge about the trend in the context of virtual workers who operate outside of conventional working relations and have no publicly recognised work identity is largely missing.

In order to address this gap, this study explores how entrepreneurial worker-subjectivities manifest in professional online poker players as an emerging online occupation. It investigates how these workers manage themselves in the absence of formal organisational control and socially recognised occupational norms, and asks what are the effects of this self-management on the quality of their working lives? The study is based on 39 in-depth interviews with people involved in online poker or other similar activities such as online gaming or trading. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face in Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania and UK or over Skype between December 2012 and May 2014.

The study develops an analytical framework for researching entrepreneurial worker-subjectivities in the context of an emerging occupation and a three-stage-model of the trajectory that provides a basis for exploring the career paths of professional online poker players. Using these framework, the study finds that professional online poker players manage various areas of the self by following

informal occupational rules and that their sense of professionalism is largely derived from various practices of self-management that help them distinguish from recreational players. The study also discovers conflicting relations of autonomy and control among the workers and a range of negative effects that self-management practices have on professional online poker players. It concludes that professional online poker is not a sustainable long-term career option. These findings contribute to a better understanding of virtual work, the emergence of online poker playing as a form of work and the development of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity.

Declaration of Authorship

I, Kaire Holts, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

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Passages of the first publication are reprinted here with the permission of the co-author Dr Romina Surugiu.

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To Charlotte who was born in the midst of this thesis...

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List of Abbreviations

ILO:	**International Labour Organization**
MMORPG:	**Massively multiplayer online role-playing games**
UIGEA:	**The Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act of 2006**
UK:	**United Kingdom**
USA:	**The United States of America**
USD:	**The United States dollar**
WOW:	**World of Warcraft**

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The first part of this introductory chapter discusses the dissolution of full-time stable employment and the emergence of precarious, insecure forms of work as the new norm in the world of work. Against this background, I introduce the debate about the 'entrepreneurial self' as the new worker-subjectivity. I show gaps in research and spell out the reasons for studying these developments in the context of new online occupations with no publicly recognised identities. The second part gives an overview of the thesis.

1.2 Context and focus of the study

A significant amount of research has emerged around the idea that work is becoming less predictable, more precarious, insecure, and surrounded by risks, constraints and uncertainties that are no longer absorbed by national welfare systems or organisations but by individuals (see e.g. Bauman, 2004, Beck, 1992, Beck, 2000, Neff, 2012). This, in turn, is indicative of a switch, a transition, rupture from an 'old' system, change in the mode of domination and the worker-subjectivity, a crisis or even a paradigm shift in the world of work (Bourdieu, 1998, Bührmann, 2005, Gorz, 2003a, Huws, 2016). The popular view is that the postwar normative model of work (predominantly in the industralised West) characterised by 'lifelong full-time work organized in a single industrial location' (Beck, 1992: 143) is weakening, and that job insecurity, intermittent, contingent work that has long been regarded as atypical, abnormal, deviant, non-traditional or non-standard is becoming the new norm (see e.g. Gorz, 1999, Hardt and Negri, 2005, Huws, 2016, Lorey, 2015, Ross, 2003, Ross, 2009, Smith, 2001, Standing, 2011). This change has been linked in much of the literature to technological changes, including digitalisation (Boes et al., 2017, Huws, 2016, ILO, 2015, Standing, 2011). The new patterns of work have inspired authors to create colourful terms such as 'the Brazilianization of the West' (Beck, 2000), 'logged labour' (Huws, 2016), the 'feminisation of labour' (Morini, 2007, Salomão and

Jobim, 2016). Cappelli (2000: 1171) even compared the new work trends to 'shaky marriages' and Ross (2003: 51) to fickle weather: 'After the 1970s, the jobs economy turned increasingly fickle. With dependable, secure employment as uncertain as the weather in New England...'. The wealth of literature, emerging terms and also the interest of the general public and policy makers in the topic leave no doubt that we are experiencing a major shift. I position my research in this broad context of the changing world of work. Against this background my concern is with the emergence of the 'entrepreneurial self' that is formed through practices of self-management and increasingly presented as the 'contemporary form of hegemonic subjectivation' (Bührmann, 2005: 2). It is regarded as dominant in western economies because it can be found in different areas of life including the world of work (Bührmann, 2005, Lorey, 2009). I am particularly interested in how this form of worker-subjectivity manifests in workers who operate outside a formal employment relationship - a category of workers that is growing (Eurofound, 2015, ILO, 2015) but has largely been neglected in studies that explore the new worker-subjectivity.

When it comes to defining the start date of the far-reaching shift in the world of work, opinions are divided. There are at least three different suggestions. On the one hand, there is a broad consensus that the shift from full-time stable employment as a norm to precarious, insecure form of work and the change in worker-subjectivity was set in motion in the third quarter of the twentieth century as a result of technological, organisational, economic and political changes (see e.g. Beck, 1992, Bell, 1973, Castells, 2010, Standing, 2011, Zuboff, 1988). On the other hand, some authors argue that the 'real' turning point happened in 1990s when 'the new economy' or the ‘dot-com’ industry was born along with the rise of the Internet (see e.g. Neff, 2012, Ross, 2003). For instance, Neff (2012: 42) argued that although the developments in the 1990s were a continuation of a transition, they marked a historical move 'from an era of corporate loyalty and job stability to an environment in which insecurity and personal responsibility for risk predominates'. The third version refers to the financial crisis in 2008 as a historical turning point when the gravity and the shadow side of the changes became fully visible and trends that already existed in

the 1990s began approaching critical mass (Huws, 2016). Guy Standing (2011: vii) puts it in this way: '...globalisation's hidden reality has come to the surface with the 2008 financial shock'. In this study, I consider the dissolution of the stable work model and the emergence of precarious, insecure work practices as something that has evolved over all three periods. I regard it as a journey that started with a slow transition in 1970s, became fully visible in 1990s and is now reaching the masses.

There has been a surge of academic interest in understanding how workers respond to increased levels of uncertainty and risk. There is a broad consensus that individuals act on themselves in ways that entrepreneurs do as a response to uncertainty and precarious environment: they bear entrepreneurial risks, manage their employability or careers by investing in education, keeping up to date with new developments, discipline themselves, manage their projects and finances (Gershon, 2011, Gill, 2010, Neff, 2012, Ross, 2003). According to this, the modern self and the ideal of the 'new worker' whether employed or self-employed is an autonomous, entrepreneurial, self-managing subject (Gorz, 2003a, Rose, 1992). A growing number of studies explore different aspects of the emerging form of worker-subjectivity such as the skills, features and the strategies that define it (Neff, 2012, Ross, 2003, Scharff, 2016), the personal costs and benefits of adopting the standards (Borghi et al., 2016, Charalambides, 2017, Kalff, 2017, Murgia et al., 2016, Norkus et al., 2016, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016, Vivant, 2016), the ways the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity is promoted (Ovetz, 2017, Sturdy and Wright, 2008, Sturges et al., 2010, Vivant, 2016), the impact the discourse has on the self-identity of workers (Du Gay, 1996, Fenwick, 2002, Storey et al., 2005) and possible resistance (Bureau and Corsani, 2016, Charalambides, 2017, Rabosto and Zukerfeld, 2017). Many authors see the trend towards self-management or the emergence of the enterprising self, and the culture of autonomous subjectivity as central features of contemporary governmentality (Gleadle et al., 2008, Rose, 1992), typical of neoliberalism (Gershon, 2011, Lorey, 2009) or the way power is exercised in the modern Western state (Foucault, 1982, Friedman, 1982) and as something that workers cannot escape from.

Despite the gravity and growing awareness of these changes, the contours of the emerging new norm of work and in particular the aspect that concerns worker-subjectivity are still not fully explored. Although authors claim that the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity is affecting a growing number of workers and occupations, there is little empirical research (Scharff, 2016). The majority of existing studies have focused on relatively few occupational groups in formal work. The entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity has largely been researched in the context of three occupational categories (with possible overlaps): media and in particular new media workers (Ashton, 2011, Gill, 2010, Neff, 2012, Rabosto and Zukerfeld, 2017, Ross, 2003, Storey et al., 2005, Sturges et al., 2010), cultural workers (Charalambides, 2017, Cohen, 2016, Lorey, 2009, Scharff, 2016) and knowledge workers (Drucker, 2005, Kalff, 2017, Murgia et al., 2016, Norkus et al., 2016, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). However, these are all workers either in standard, formal employment relationships or work as self-employed or freelancers and belong to occupational groups that have publicly recognised work identities. There are only a few authors who have explored the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity in the context of informal work relations (Marques, 2017) or non-standard forms of employment (Borghi et al., 2016). And what these debates have missed is the emergence of online work, digital labour, and in particular the emergence of new online occupations with no publicly recognised identities. However, digital work is discussed as being at the forefront of a paradigm shift in the world of work and is clearly important (Boes et al., 2017).

To address this gap, I focus on virtual workers who are in 'non-standard' working relations and do not fall into any other existing categories of work. In this context, I focus on professional online poker players. These are people who play online poker with the aim to make a living from it, treat it as a work activity and distinguish themselves from recreational players. I am particularly interested in the construction of the professional self in these workers. However, this is not to be confused with occupational identity. I am interested in it in broad way: how professional online players recognise themselves as professionals, to what extent is this self based on a normative idea of what a professional player is and the

identification with others. More specific research questions will be presented in Chapter 3.

1.3 Structure of the thesis

The study attempts to answer the following question (see Chapter 3): How do isolated online workers manage themselves in the absence of formal organisational control or socially recognised occupational norms, and what are the effects of this self-management on the quality of their working lives? The thesis is divided into nine chapters that are structured in the following way.

Chapter 2 sets the scene for the study. It considers professional online poker playing through the lens of sociology and establishes it as a form of virtual work that is carried out outside the scope of traditional employment relationships. It clarifies the meaning of the term 'virtual work' and critically assesses the classification of work into standard and non-standard forms of work. The chapter highlights the importance of studying professional online poker players. It gives a rationale for studying the trend towards self-management in this context and shows how it can contribute to a better understanding of other forms of virtual work that are carried out in non-standard work relations and have no publicly recognised work identity.

Building on terms and definitions introduced in the previous chapter, Chapter 3 reviews the literature on various practices of self-management and self-control and on their effects on the quality of workers' lives. It discusses the trend towards managing multiple areas of the self and shows how it has been studied in the context of formal occupations and standard work relations but how there is a gap in studying it in the context of an emerging online occupation with no publicly recognised work identity. Building on these discussions, it formulates the research questions for this study.

Chapter 4 reflects on the adoption of an exploratory approach as an overall principle, doing qualitative research and using constructivist grounded theory as

a research strategy, and describes the reasons for positioning the study in the interpretative tradition of research. It shows how the unknown and 'hidden' character of professional poker informed these choices. It also describes the characteristics of the sample, how the data were collected and analysed and the ethical principles that were followed to ensure that no harm was caused to research subjects.

Chapter 5 is the first of the four chapters that discusses the data gathered in interviews. This chapter explores the process of becoming a professional online poker player in a three-stage model of the trajectory that consists of an exploratory, a professional and a post-professional stage. It discusses the first two stages of the model by examining how players experience the transition from recreational into professional playing, the reasons for choosing poker work and the factors that support the decision.

Chapter 6 examines the attributes and processes through which the professional self is constructed. It shows how the sense of professionalism is formed as a combination of individual and external collective processes. The individual identity is largely formed through continuous efforts put into training and the definition of a bundle of skills with self-organisation and self-control being of particular importance, and the collective identity through patterns of mutual support and a common language. The discussion that is structured along these lines gives insights into the areas of the self that professional online poker players manage as part of their occupation.

Chapter 7 explores how professional poker players manage various areas of the self as identified in Chapter 6 and gives evidence of conflicting relations of autonomy and control among them. Firstly, it examines the work practices of geographically isolated online players and finds that despite the isolation there are many similarities between the professional players. Secondly, it analyses the relations of autonomy and control among independent professional players and those who were financed by another person. It discusses the external and self-

imposed restrictions that shape and structure players' work and limit their autonomy.

Chapter 8 focuses on the personal costs and benefits of self-management and reflects on their implications for the long-term sustainability of professional online poker as an occupation. It places the discussion in the three-stage model that was introduced in Chapter 5 by referring to the third (post-professional) stage. It shows how insecure, irregular income, physical, mental exhaustion and psycho-physical stress drive professional players to look for alternatives. This calls the sustainability of professional online poker as a long-time career into question.

The final chapter revisits the research questions from Chapter 3 and draws conclusions. It discusses the theoretical contributions and limitations of the study, and makes recommendations for future research.

1.4 Conclusion

This introductory chapter has placed the study in the context of the changing world of work and introduced the trend towards managing multiple areas of the self as an important characteristic of the emerging worker-subjectivity. It has discussed gaps in research and in particular the lack of research with regard to emerging online occupations with no publicly recognised work identities. These themes will be discussed in more detail in the chapters that follow.

Chapter 2: Setting the scene

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I define various terms and provide a rationale for focusing on professional online poker players as an emerging online occupation with no publicly recognised identity. The chapter begins by defining the terms 'virtual work' and 'non-standard work'. I explore how they are commonly defined and show the etymology of the words 'work', 'labour, 'digital' and 'virtual'. Building on the definition of virtual work, I highlight the importance of studying the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity in this context. The chapter then investigates what is known about professional online poker players. Firstly, it looks into statistics about online gambling and poker and shows the difficulties estimating the scale of professional online poker playing. Secondly, it studies the conditions under which online poker can be seen as a work activity. The chapter finishes by a discussion of different concepts and approaches to work and provides justification for the use of the sociological perspective for studying online poker players.

2.2 What is virtual work?

While many work processes and existing workplaces have been altered as a result of digitalisation, there is a growing number of new work-like activities that have emerged on the Internet. Online spaces and digital technologies have produced activities ranging from real-money trading in 'massively multiplayer online role-playing games' (MMORPG) (Heeks, 2008, Nakamura, 2009, Wang, 2006, Zhang and Fung, 2013), online content production (Beer and Burrows, 2010, Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010), online content moderation (Huntemann, 2015, Roberts, 2016), crowdsourcing (Buhrmester et al., 2011, Caraway, 2010, Estellés-Arolas and González-Ladrón-De-Guevara, 2012, Howe, 2006), 'modding' (Banks and Potts, 2010, Hong and Chen, 2013, Sotamaa, 2010), search quality assessment by human raters (Bilić, 2016), human-based computation games (von Ahn and Dabbish,

2008), community management in online games (Kerr, 2016) or browsing, sharing files, and connecting with friends (Coté and Pybus, 2007, Lazzarato, 1996, Pybus, 2011, Terranova, 2013). Alongside these developments, new terms are emerging to describe the virtual workforce of which 'gold farmer', 'prosumer', 'Turker', 'click-worker' or 'microworker' are only a few examples (Holts, 2013). A growing number of scholars now refer to these and related activities as 'new labour activities', 'virtual work' or 'digital labour' (Burston et al., 2010, Casilli, 2017, Fuchs, 2014, Huws, 2003, Scholz, 2013).

Virtual work - a term that is often used interchangeably with 'digital labour' - can be defined as work 'whether paid or unpaid that is carried out using a combination of digital and telecommunications technologies and/or produces content for digital media' (COST, 2012: 4). However, not everyone agrees with this definition. One frequent point of discussion is whether and what type of offline work should be included in the definition of virtual work. The broadest definition of digital labour/ virtual work to date includes physical, manual work that is needed for the production of digital media such as mining for minerals that are needed for the manufacturing of laptops and mobile phones, assembling of digital gadgets (Dyer-Witheford, 2015, Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014, Fuchs, 2014). In contrast, Huws (2017) makes a distinction between virtual work which is both carried out and managed online and work which is managed online although its execution may involve offline manual work. This definition excludes offline work needed for the production of digital gadgets. Another point of discussion is concerned with unpaid work. Should it be included in the definition of virtual work and if so what constitutes unpaid work in online spaces? The boundary between paid and unpaid virtual work is unclear. There are unpaid activities such as social networking, community building, file sharing, or blogging that are argued to be a form of value creating labour (see e.g. Cardon and Casilli, 2015, Fuchs, 2012, Scholz, 2010, Terranova, 2013) and sometimes included in the definition of digital labour. However, there are also online activities that people do in the anticipation of income generation. This is the case when for instance work takes the form of competition with a monetary reward for the winner or work that is rejected by a client and is therefore only 'an investment in the possibility of

generating future income' (Huws, 2015: 3). It is not clear whether the latter should be considered as paid or unpaid work. For the purpose of this study, I take a narrow approach to virtual work and define it as work that is carried out online and for the purpose of income generation. This captures both work that is paid and work that is done in the anticipation of income generation. I exclude unpaid work carried out online that does not aim at income generation and all work carried out offline.

Although the terms 'virtual work' and 'digital labour' are often used interchangeably I have chosen to use the term 'virtual work' in my study because of the etymology of the word 'work'. Historically the term 'work' comes from the Old English noun *weorc* which is the 'most general word for doing something' (Williams, 1983: 334) denoting 'activity' (Frayssé, 2014) whereas the word 'labour' comes from the Latin word *laborem* and was associated with pain and hard work (Williams, 1983: 176-177). For the purpose of this study, I use the term 'work' (as in 'virtual work') that has partly kept its original broader meaning according to Fuchs and Sandoval (2014) because this reflects better the diversity of 'non-standard' work carried out online that may sometimes not look like work but is considered as such by those who do it.

Turning to the words 'digital' and 'virtual', they are also often used interchangeably in the context of work. The word 'digital' comes from Latin *digitalis* which refers to 'finger, toe' or 'belonging to the finger' and has been applied in anatomy to describe respective body parts (Pearsall, 2001: 515, Simpson and Weiner, 1991: 654). Later the term was linked to computerisation created by binary code which consists of the digits 0 and 1 – a pre-condition to a wide range of developments such as relocation of work, teleworking, standardisation of tasks, automation, surveillance and monitoring at a distance (Huws, 2016, Huws, 2017). In contrast, the term 'virtual' relates more widely to communications that do not involve face-to-face interactions. It comes from Latin *virtus* that referred to strength or power (Shields, 2003). In medieval period it became *virtuālis* which described 'certain physical virtues or capacities', 'the power to produce results, to have an effect' (Shields, 2003: 3) or to be 'effective in

respect of inherent natural qualities of powers; capable of exerting influence by means of such qualities' (Simpson and Weiner, 1991: 674). Even though this power may not exist in reality it is nevertheless as effective as if it did (Valentino, 2003). One of the most important contributions for understanding the distinction between virtual and actual comes from French philosopher Gilles Deleuze who proposed that even when the virtual does not have concrete existence it is no less real than the actual (Buchanan, 2010: 4). So the term 'virtual' has been used to describe simulations of the actual that become 'more real than real' e.g. a map that reproduces an actual world but takes on a life of its own (Shields, 2003: 4). Also computer scientists have adopted the term to describe something that is 'not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so from the point of view of the programme or the user' (Simpson and Weiner, 1991: 674). While I use the term 'work' to capture the diversity of 'non-standard' work, I use the term 'virtual' to indicate that the focus of my research is on work that emerged on the Internet and is carried out online with no face-to-face contact but that is nevertheless real and should be treated as 'real work'.

In my study, I am particularly concerned with those virtual workers who are in 'non-standard' working relations with no publicly recognised work identities. There is no clear definition of non-standard or atypical work but it is typically understood as work that falls outside the realms of the standard employment relationship (Eurofound, 2015, Eurofound, 2016, ILO, 2015). The International Labour Organization (ILO) describes the standard work relationship as 'work that is full time and, indefinite, as well as part of a subordinate, but bilateral, employment relationship' (ILO, 2015: 32-33). Eurofound takes a similar approach by describing standard employment as 'a long-term, full-time work relationship between a worker and a single employer' (Eurofound, 2016: 20). There is a general growth of work that is carried out beyond the scope of traditional employment relationships and traditional forms of management in particular (Eurofound, 2015). According to the ILO, three quarters of the global workforce is in non-standard forms of employment which includes temporary, casual and part-time employment, own-account and informal work (ILO, 2015). Although it is not known what proportion of these workers are involved in virtual work (as defined

above), various studies show that it is common for workers who do paid work carried out online to work outside of conventional working relations (Casilli, 2017, De Stefano, 2016, Huws, 2016, Mandl and Curtarelli, 2017, Méda and Vendramin, 2017, Webster and Randle, 2016). There is a trend towards heterogeneity of employment forms for both salaried and self-employed workers (Mandl and Curtarelli, 2017: 55). Virtual work as defined above appears to be nurturing the latter category. Many of the virtual workers work as self-employed freelancers, independent contractors, partially self-employed, disguised or dependent self-employed, are in casual and short-term forms of collaboration sometimes involving multiple parties, or are in entirely new forms of work and employment (De Stefano, 2016, Eurofound, 2015, Mandl and Curtarelli, 2017, Schörpf et al., 2017a, Webster and Randle, 2016). In my study, I understand the term 'non-standard work' as work that occurs outside the realm of standard employment and does not exist as a formally recognised occupation. I have chosen to include the 'hidden' aspect because various studies report that online spaces and digital technologies have produced a range of work-like activities many of which are formally not recognised as occupations (see e.g. Damarin, 2006, Huws and Dahlmann, 2010, Lehdonvirta and Mezier, 2013). Although this type of work is likely to be carried out outside the scope of national tax and national insurance regulations, and labour codes (see e.g. De Stefano, 2016), I have not distinguished between workers who declare their income and those who do not. I include them both in my study.

In this study, I will focus on how isolated virtual workers in such non-standard work relations manage themselves in the absence of formal organisational control and socially recognised occupational norms. Studying it is relevant for several reasons. Firstly, there is a growing interest in understanding the characteristics of virtual work (Webster and Randle, 2016) but there is a lack of empirical research. Secondly, many forms of virtual work are considered as particularly precarious (Casilli, 2017, Webster and Randle, 2016) and given that self-management practices are discussed as a popular response to increased levels of uncertainty and risks at work (Gershon, 2011, Gill, 2010, Neff, 2012, Ross, 2003), the 'entrepreneurial self' is likely to be a distinctive feature of virtual work. This

aspect has, however, been neglected in studies of virtual work. Thirdly, it is not known how the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity manifests in workers who belong to occupational groups that have no publicly recognised work identities. Virtual work offers an interesting context to explore these questions. Although I draw on different types of literature and various debates, the main interest of my research lies in contributing to a better understanding of virtual work. However, my study inevitably also contributes to understanding the trend towards self-management and the 'enterprising self'.

In order to study how the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity manifests in virtual workers who operate outside of a formal employment relationship, I focus on one particular understudied group of workers: professional online poker players. This is a group of workers who work in isolation from each other, are outside of formal management control, and whose occupation is not formally recognised.

2.3 Professional online poker players

Professional online poker players are people who distinguish themselves from recreational players and regard poker playing as work. It is often argued that online gambling does not fall into the category of work in the sense of an activity that is relied on as a source of income (see more about how I define work in the section below), however my research and a few pioneering studies carried out since I began work on my thesis have shown that for some players it is a work activity (Bjerg, 2010, Dufour et al., 2015, Hing et al., 2015, Hing et al., 2016, Istrate, 2011, Jouhki, 2011a, Jouhki, 2012, McCormack and Griffiths, 2012, Radburn and Horsley, 2011, Weinstock et al., 2013, Zaman et al., 2014). Yet, little is known about the characteristics and working conditions of this type of virtual work. It is important to note that not all the studies make a distinction between offline and online poker players or between players of poker and other games. Some of them talk about 'gambling' or 'poker' in general. To my knowledge, to date, there is no published research about the new worker-subjectivity in the context of professional online poker players. However, the topic matters because,

as I will demonstrate, there is evidence that the popularity of online gambling is growing and thus it is likely that the number of people playing poker professionally may also be rising. Understanding the characteristics of those workers does not only help us understand these professional players but can also help shed light on other forms of isolated and unrecognised forms of virtual work.

2.4 The prevalence of professional online poker playing

It is difficult to estimate the scale of professional online poker playing as there are no official statistics available. However, there are statistics relating to online gambling and poker in general. The popularity of gambling, and poker in particular, has grown hugely since it went online in the early twenty-first century (see e.g. Bjerg, 2010, ESPAD, 2016, Fiedler and Wilcke, 2011, Gainsbury, 2012, Griffiths and Barnes, 2008, Meyer et al., 2009, Ranade et al., 2006, Wardle et al., 2011b). Although most online games are based on the same rules or principles as their offline counterparts, they are reported to cause changes to the size of the market, the number and type of the audience and the way in which they are played (see e.g. Griffiths and Barnes, 2008, Wardle et al., 2011a). Online gambling reaches a much wider audience than traditional forms of gambling (Wood and Williams, 2011). It is estimated that 40 million people across the northern hemisphere play poker regularly (offline or online) and that online poker has become a multi-billion-dollar market (Fiedler and Wilcke, 2011, PPR, 2009). In 2009, the size of the online poker market was estimated at 2.7 billion USD (net revenues of stock listed online poker operators) and the number of people who played it for real money (as opposed to virtual play money) on at least five leading platforms[1] was estimated to be six million players in 2010, paying an estimated 3.61 billion USD rake (the rake equals the sum of the players' losses) to the operators (Fiedler and Wilcke, 2011). A survey by Poker Players Research (PPR) with a sample size of 216,089 (online and offline poker players) from North America, Australia and Western Europe[2] estimated that in 2009, around 10.1

[1] PokerStars, Full Tilt Poker, Everest Poker, IPN (Boss Media), Cake Poker

[2] The countries covered were USA, Canada, UK, France, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, Italy, Spain, Holland, Belgium, Poland, Austria, Switzerland, Australia.

million people played online poker for real money at least once a month. This is an increase from 7.9 million in 2007 (PPR, 2009). The same survey found that the percentage of people playing at more than four tables (online) at the same time had grown from 4 per cent in 2007 to 7 per cent in 2009 (PPR, 2009). As this type of multi-table strategy has been linked to professional playing (McCormack and Griffiths, 2012) these figures may hint at the growing popularity of professional playing. In a survey of 4594 Australian gamblers (covering all types of gambling) that was conducted in 2012, 8 per cent of players identified themselves as either professional or semi-professionals as opposed to amateur gamblers (Hing et al., 2015). It is possible that the percentage of professional players is somewhere around 7-8 per cent of all the online poker players as these two surveys suggest. However, more evidence is needed to support this point.

Table 2.1: Countries with the highest number of active (online) poker players in 2010

Rank	Country	Active players	Share
1	USA	1,429,943	23.71 %
2	Germany	581,350	9.64 %
3	France	445,860	7.39 %
4	Russia	401,701	6.66 %
5	Canada	345,971	5.74 %
6	Great Britain	269,247	4.47 %
7	Spain	253,043	4.20 %
8	Netherlands	239,700	3.98 %
9	Brazil	153,889	2.55 %
10	Australia	129,714	2.15 %
	Other	1,571,389	26.06 %
	TOTAL	5,490,908	100 %

Source: (Fiedler and Wilcke, 2011: 10)

In terms of geographical distribution, Fiedler and Wilcke (2011) ranked ten countries according to the number of their online poker players (see Table 2.1) showing that in 2010, the biggest share of online poker players lived in North

America and Europe. In 2010, the USA was the biggest market with 1.4 million online players who generated 981 million USD in rake to site operators which compares to 307,000 players in Canada who generated 220 million USD (Philander and Fiedler, 2012). The study by PPR (2009) also ranks the USA at the top in terms of the number of online poker players.

However, these statistics do not distinguish between recreational and professional players although in addition to the growth of the industry there are also technological developments that suggest that poker could provide a main or supplementary source of income for a growing number of people around the world. Technological developments such as Internet and mobile technologies have facilitated the emergence of professional online poker players in different ways. Firstly, they have brought poker into the home and the workplace environment (Griffiths and Barnes, 2008). Secondly, digital tools are helping players to reduce the risk factor in online poker, play at multiple tables, track other players' performance (e.g. Hold'em Manager), or help them to distinguish between experienced and casual players who are often termed 'fish' in poker slang (for this type of 'fish finder software' see for example Poker Edge, Table Shark, Tournament Shark, Smart Buddy). Tools also exist that can partly automate humans' play. The Internet has made training videos and knowledge exchange platforms accessible to players (Palomäki et al., 2013).

These developments have contributed to the emergence of a type of player for whom playing online poker is work. Yet very little is known about this type of virtual work. Existing research treats poker as a form of entertainment, consumption, and gambling (Abarbanel, 2014, Binde, 2005) but rarely as a form of work (Hayano, 1984). Occasionally it is also discussed as sport (Schuck, 2010). In this framework, popular topics include playing strategy (see e.g. Haigh, 2002, Kushida et al., 2007, Seale and Phelan, 2010, Zadeh, 1977), psychosocial effects, such as problem gambling, game addiction, and substance abuse (see e.g. Bjerg, 2010, Farrell, 2017, Griffiths, 2004, Winters et al., 2005), and demographic questions (see e.g. Wardle et al., 2011b, Wardle et al., 2007, Will Shead et al., 2008, Wood and Williams, 2011). The majority of academic articles about online poker

continue this tradition by focusing on a similar range of topics and by treating it as a recreational activity. However, as I showed in this section, online gambling is a growing phenomenon and thus more research is needed to understand different aspects of it including professional online poker playing. My research addresses this gap by studying it as an emerging form or work.

2.5 Poker playing as a work activity

The aim of this section is to establish the conditions under which online poker can be seen as a work activity and define the characteristics that allow generalisation to other types of virtual work. The few studies that explore professional poker players mainly focus on mapping the criteria that distinguish them from recreational players or pathological/ problem gamblers (Dufour et al., 2015, Hing et al., 2015, Istrate, 2011, McCormack and Griffiths, 2012, Radburn and Horsley, 2011, Weinstock et al., 2013). In this context, most authors define a professional gambler as someone who 'is able' to make a living out of playing (Bjerg, 2010, Istrate, 2011, McCormack and Griffiths, 2012, Radburn and Horsley, 2011, Zaman et al., 2014), others as someone who 'seeks' to make a living (Hayano, 1977, Morehead, 1950). Hayano, who studied professional offline poker players as a deviant occupational group in the card rooms of California and Nevada, emphasised that the distinction between recreational and professional playing cannot be based on financial criteria only because not every player who attempts to make a living actually does so (Hayano, 1982: 76). Given the characteristics of poker it is unlikely that any player wins all the time. Hayano (1982) suggested that a subjective measure is needed for analysing poker as a work activity and argued that individual's self-identification should be taken as a basis for analysis. Although he conducted his research before the age of the Internet and the emergence of online poker platforms not much has changed in this regard. There is no income guarantee in online poker. In my research, I make the assumption that playing online poker is work for some players. By adopting Hayano's approach I distinguish a professional from a recreational player by defining the former as someone who 'aims' or 'strives' to make a living out of online poker and treats it as a work activity. This definition also captures the category of virtual

workers, previously referred to, who work 'in the hope' of income generation and thus addresses the fuzzy boundary between some types of unpaid and paid virtual work bringing in more clarity. In summary, my research focuses on online poker players who treat their gambling activity as work that provides them with an income, whether it is their main source of income or a supplement to earnings from other sources.

There is no evidence that professional gambling or poker exists as a formally recognised occupation. Existing studies have labelled professional poker players as a deviant or marginal occupational group (Hayano, 1977, Hayano, 1982, Hayano, 1984, Istrate, 2011, Jouhki, 2011b, Morehead, 1950, Radburn and Horsley, 2011). It is not taking place inside traditional organisations and there are no professional institutions or socially recognised occupational norms. Although Hayano made the following statement more than three decades ago it still captures the current situation:

Poker-playing as a career demands no formal socialization practices, special training programs, recruitment policies, identification cards, diplomas, or licences. The lack of such career markers and distinctive physical signs, such as a uniform, make it difficult to tell who is and who is not a member. (Hayano, 1982: 131)

Depending on the country's legislation and on whether a player declares his or her winnings, professional poker playing is not only an unrecognised occupation but in some cases also at the margin of legitimacy (Hayano, 1982, Nevius, 2016). For instance, in the UK and Estonia individual players are not required to declare their revenues from online poker. Their winnings already incorporate a tax as it is collected directly from online poker companies (HMRC, 2014, HMRC, 2016, Riigikogu, 2009). However, in Romania individual players are taxed and the gambling companies have the obligation[3] of keeping records of players' winnings (ONJN). In this case, players may act illegally if they do not declare their earnings.

[3] 'The organiser of gambling under paragraph (7) has the obligation to keep nominal records of individuals who obtained incomes form gambling exceeding 15,000 euros and to declare them to the competent fiscal authority' ONJN. *Legislația aferentă domeniului jocurilor de noroc* [Online]. Available at: http://onjn.gov.ro/legislatia-aferenta-domeniului-jocurilor-de-noroc-2/ [Accessed: 15 July 2017].

Despite the labels which suggest that professional poker is work even if it is outside 'the standard', not much is known about the way it is organised as work or the social relations entailed in it, such as players' relationships to other gamblers and any third parties such as intermediaries or 'stakers'. It can therefore only be assumed that given their informal occupational status, professional players are unlikely to be organised in standard employment relationships and be under formal management control. As will be shown later in this dissertation, some professional poker players are in arrangements that do not fit into the conventional categories of 'employment' or 'self-employment' but nevertheless involve some dependency on others. Other players are likely to work independently, on their own account. The fact that online players are not bound to a place but only to the availability of digital infrastructure, and are driven by the desire to work independently (Radburn and Horsley, 2011) suggests that many of them may work in isolation from each other (regardless of their employment status). Online poker can thus be seen as an emerging form of virtual work - a form that is carried out outside the scope of traditional employment relationships and traditional forms of management, and has no publicly recognised work identity. As shown previously, these features are also found in other forms of isolated and unrecognised virtual work, suggesting that it may therefore be possible to generalise the findings beyond online poker players.

Poker players who experience risks and uncertainties on a daily basis present an opportunity to analyse the entrepreneurial worker subjectivity. Studying these workers could be regarded as studying an extreme case of the 'new worker' and could therefore provide new insights into the entrepreneurial self that has emerged as a response to labour market uncertainties (Gershon, 2011, Gill, 2010, Neff, 2012, Ross, 2003).

2.6 What is 'work'...?

There are a number of different lenses through which 'work' activities can be viewed. This research considers work through the lens of sociology. The defining characteristic of the sociological perspective is that it explores 'relationships

which develop between human beings as they organise themselves and are organised by others' (Watson, 2003: 3). In this sense, there is also broad agreement within the sociological literature that the question of whether or not an activity is experienced as work is dependent on the social context and social relations within which it occurs (Grint, 2005, Joyce, 1987, Pahl, 1988a, Wadel, 1979, Wallman, 1979).

This research adopts a broad concept of work that recognises that it is not limited to paid employment in organisations but also exists outside of waged labour (Applebaum, 1992, Blyton and Jenkins, 2007, Glucksmann, 2005, Grint, 2005, Joyce, 1987, Pahl, 1988a, Parry et al., 2006, Taylor, 2004, Wadel, 1979, Wallman, 1979, Watson, 2003). Feminist researchers (Folbre, 2004, Oakley, 1986, Tancred, 1995) were among the first to challenge the concept of work as being limited to full-time waged labour in organisations and contributed to a revision and broadening of the concept of work (Parry et al., 2006). As a result, the 1970s 'domestic labour debate' made unpaid housework visible as a form of work (Beechey, 1987: 126). This debate has also helped to make other previously 'hidden work' (Parry et al., 2006: 9, Wadel, 1979) visible, such as voluntary work (Blyton and Jenkins, 2007, Parry et al., 2006, Taylor, 2004), precarious part-time or temporary work (Kalleberg, 2000, Ross, 2009), creative or artistic work (Dean and Jones, 2003, Fletcher and Lobato, 2013), illegal work (Fairlie, 2002, Frith and McElwee, 2007), clandestine work (De Grazia, 1980) or work in the informal economy (Mingione, 1995, Pahl, 1988b, Williams and Windebank, 2003).

Recently, the question of how to conceptualise work carried out online using communication technologies has been raised (see e.g. Caraway, 2010, Coté and Pybus, 2007, Scholz, 2013). The work of online poker players can arguably be best positioned within this latest wave of discussion, which shows an increasingly heterogeneous picture of forms of work carried out outside the standard employment relationship (Casilli, 2017, De Stefano, 2016, Huws, 2016, Mandl and Curtarelli, 2017, Méda and Vendramin, 2017, Webster and Randle, 2016). Many authors believe that the boundaries between work and play, work and leisure time, consumption and production have become increasingly blurred in the era of

digital technologies and that, in this process, new forms of work are emerging (see e.g. Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012, Connor, 2005, Yee, 2006). Some of the terms that are used to explain the shifting of boundaries between work and non-work or leisure are 'playbour' (Kücklich, 2005), 'ludocapitalism' (Dibbell, 2007b), 'productive play' (Sotamaa, 2007), and 'prosumption' (Comor, 2010, Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010, Toffler et al., 1981). These concepts draw on the assumption that previously there was a sharp division between work and leisure time activities (Burke, 1995, Kabanoff, 1980, Parker, 1965, Spencer, 2008, Wilensky, 1960) – a division that is being dissolved now. However, both concepts – the sharp division between work and non-work and the blurring of boundaries between them – have been criticized for being too simplistic. Some authors call for a more inclusive approach (Glucksmann, 2005, Goggin, 2011, Grint, 2005, Parry et al., 2006, Taylor, 2004). According to Goggin (2011), whether something constitutes work or leisure depends on context, attitude and agency not just on wages. Glucksmann (2005: 32) suggests that both the differentiation and embeddedness of work and leisure are likely to be relative, and that the questions to ask are: what is embedded in what, the manner and degree of embeddedness. My research follows an inclusive approach by adopting the view that whether an activity is perceived as work or leisure is relative and may differ between actors and the context. What matters is the subjective view of actors on their activity and their recognition at least in the group of similar agents. Bourdieu put it as follows: in order to escape from the 'shadowy existence of the nameless crafts' a degree of recognition is needed from others: 'A group's presence or absence in the official classification depends on its capacity to get itself recognised, to get itself noticed and admitted, and so to win a place in the social order...' (Bourdieu, 1984: 482). This suggests that the ability to get itself recognised becomes particularly important if an activity is not publicly recognised as work as is the case with professional online poker.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has revealed that despite the increasing popularity of online poker and reports about players who make a living from it, very little is known about

the characteristics of this type of work. However, it is evident that it is carried out outside the scope of traditional employment relationships and that professional online poker players have no publicly recognised work identities. This is similar to other work-like activities that have emerged on the Internet which may make it possible to generalise from professional online poker players to other forms of virtual work.

There are various reasons for studying the enterprising self in the context of professional online poker players. Firstly, it is not known how the enterprising self manifests in the absence of formal organisational control and socially recognised occupational norms. However, the claim that it is a dominant form of worker-subjectivity (Bührmann, 2005: 2) remains weak until it is also studied in workers who operate outside a formal employment relationship. Secondly, the trend towards self-management has not been studied in the context of virtual workers as defined above. This study addresses these gaps and aims to contribute to a better understanding of virtual work in general (which is the primary interest of this study), the emergence of online poker playing as a form of work and of factors that contribute to the development of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity. The next chapter explores how the enterprising self can be studied.

Chapter 3: The managed self: an analytical framework

3.1 Introduction

Although a growing number of authors discuss the enterprising self as the new worker subjectivity there is a lack of guidance on how to research it in the context of an emerging occupation. In this chapter, I explore the literature on the managed self with the aim of recognising patterns and developing a framework which helps in studying it in the context of professional online poker players. Firstly, I explore how the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity is defined and labelled in the literature. Secondly, I study the areas of the self and work that people manage as part of the project of the self. Thirdly, I look at conflicting relations of autonomy and at their impact on self-managed workers. Research questions are formed throughout the discussion.

3.2 The entrepreneurial project of the self

It is clear from the literature that the 'entrepreneurial self' that is discussed as the hegemonic form of worker-subjectivity (Bührmann, 2005, Rose, 1992) is constituted through specific practices of self-management and self-control. The research about these practices is spread across disciplines such as sociology, media and communication, cultural, organisational behaviour, labour and management studies. A major part of the literature that studies the 'entrepreneurial self' comes from authors in the Foucauldian tradition. According to this tradition, the core feature of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity is what Foucault calls the 'care of the self' or the 'technologies of the self' that 'permit individuals to effect, by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves' (Foucault, 1988: 18). Foucault was particularly interested in the history of various technologies through which a human being constitutes him- or herself as subject and in practices that individuals have applied to themselves in the past in order to reach a 'state of

happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality' (Foucault, 1988: 18). He also studied the linkages between the practices of self-management and forms of power (Foucault, 1982).

Translated into the context of contemporary work, 'taking care of the self' in the Foucauldian sense covers a range of practices aimed at managing different aspects of the self. They include managing one's career, one's emotions, reputation, networks, wellbeing at work, daily work activities versus someone else such as an employer, occupational body or a national state agency managing, directing or taking care of these (Du Gay, 1996, Gill, 2010, Lorey, 2009, Neff, 2012, Rose, 1992, Ross, 2003). This typically means that individuals are increasingly required to act on themselves in ways that entrepreneurs are thought to do: they bear entrepreneurial or economic risks, manage their employability or careers by investing in their education, keep up to date with new developments in their field of work, discipline themselves, manage their projects and finances, as Gill (2010: 260) describes it:

You are required to train yourself, keep up-to-date, find or create your own work, monitor your progress, compare yourself with others, anticipate what will come next, maintain your distinct reputation, meet deadlines whatever costs they exert on your body or relationships, prepare for contingencies such as illness, injury or old age, make contacts, network and socialise, and to do all of this in an atmosphere in which your success or failure is understood in entirely individualistic terms.

The core idea of the neoliberal worker-subjectivity is that individuals are projects that they must themselves manage, maintain, nurture and invest in. Gershon (2011: 539) describes it in the following way:

One is never 'in the moment'; rather, one is always faced with one's self as a project that must be consciously steered through various possible alliances and obstacles.

Although the idea that contemporary individuals are 'making a project of themselves' can extend to all areas of life (Rose, 1992: 9), the focus of my study is

on those practices and modes of acting on the self that are linked to work. I am interested in the worker-subjectivity.

Despite the growing academic interest in the topic, existing studies remain poorly linked across disciplines. This has led to a bewildering variety of terms and definitions. The phenomenon has been labelled: 'wholesale management of the self' (Gill, 2010), 'production de soi' that translates into 'production of the self' (Gorz, 2003a), 'venture labor' (Neff, 2012), 'no-collar mentality' (Ross, 2003), 'entrepreneurial self' (Bührmann, 2005), 'enterprising self' (Bröckling, 2005, Fenwick, 2002, Rose, 1992, Sturdy and Wright, 2008), 'entrepreneurial labour' (Cohen, 2016, Neff et al., 2005), 'enterprise culture' (Du Gay, 1996, Rose, 1992) or 'self-work ethic' (Heelas, 2002). The concept also extends to practices simply described as self-control, self-discipline, self-management, self-regulation (see e.g. Du Gay, 1996, Grey, 1994, Lorey, 2009, Sturges et al., 2010), 'management of the self' (Lorey, 2009, Ross, 2003) or 'self-government' (Lorey, 2009). The overwhelming majority of studies use the prefix 'self' in one way or another or, as Gorz (2003a) stated in the German version of his book[4], the prefix 'self' is becoming the most important postulate of work (Gorz, 2003b: 31). Rose (1992) also talks about the 'regime of the self'. While some authors (mainly but not exclusively the authors in the Foucauldian tradition) talk about the modern subjectivity, hegemonic subjectivity, new or novel forms of worker-subjectivity (Bührmann, 2005, Gill, 2010) others categorise these developments as the new work ethic (Heelas, 2002), work culture or work mentality (Du Gay, 1996, Ross, 2003). What all these terms have in common is that they describe one or more aspects of the way workers manage the self, their work-related life. They provide a reference to various modes of acting on the self and reveal the need to manage multiple areas of the self, treat the 'self' as a project. The terms 'entrepreneurial', 'enterprising' or 'entrepreneur' are not used in the traditional sense of describing a founder/ the spirit of an independent business venture, a self-employed person, or a freelancer but they imply a new ideal of enterprise that involves more personal risk and responsibility and less power and agency than 'true' entrepreneurs enjoy (Cohen, 2016, Du Gay, 1996, Kanter, 1990).

[4] This is missing in the original French version of the book

The studies behind these terms provide little guidance on how to study the 'enterprising self' in the context of an emerging occupational group. For instance, authors in the Foucauldian tradition tend to explore the linkage between self-management and power (Lorey, 2009, Rose, 1992); others study the enterprising self in the context of an organisation or formal employment (Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016), or focus on one mode of acting on the self or one area of the self that is managed such as one's career (Kossek et al., 1998, Sturges et al., 2010) or emotions (Bolton, 2005). In my study, I am interested in a broader view and want to understand how it manifests in one occupational group and in the impact it has on workers. I want to understand how taking care of the self shapes work processes, the way workers define themselves, their autonomy and their life outside work and whether or how these combined processes contribute to the emergence of a new occupation. To learn about these matters in the context of professional online poker players, I formulate the main research question of the study as follows.

How do isolated online workers manage themselves in the absence of formal organisational control or socially recognised occupational norms, and what are the effects of this self-management on the quality of their working lives?

In order to unpack the first part of the question I take inspiration from Foucault's description of Plato's Alcibiades. The Plato dialogue that Foucault refers to analyses the notion of 'taking pains with oneself' by asking: what is this self of which one has to take care, and of what does that care consist? (Foucault, 1988: 25). Inspired by this I ask: what areas of work or the self are professional online poker players managing and how do they manage themselves? In the following section I explore these two sub-questions in more detail.

3.3 Self-management and self-control - what is being managed and how?

The areas of the self and work that people manage as part of the project of the self are not clearly defined in the literature and are scattered across disciplines. What is managed and how it is managed also varies depending on the occupation and the characteristics of a job. However, I identified three broad categories that are discussed in the literature as forms of work on the self: body-work-practices of the self, career self-management and self-directed organisation of daily work activities. In the next three sections, I describe these areas briefly and look for broad variables that define the way these self-management activities are carried out. I also explore on what grounds these activities can be theorised as modes of subjectification.

3.3.1 Body-work-practices on the self

The first category refers to everything bodily: practices of self-management that aim at managing emotions, thoughts, behaviour and appearance, as Foucault (1988: 18) described it: 'own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being'. This area of the self is dominated by two debates of which one focuses on the concept of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1985) and the other on 'bio-power' (Foucault, 1978). The first debate is positioned around the concept of 'emotional labour' according to which emotions are managed through surface or deep acting as a requirement of a job or an occupation (Bolton, 2005, Hochschild, 1985, Hochschild, 1979). This concept has also launched a debate about 'aesthetic labour' - when workers are required to manage the way they look, their physical appearance (Elias et al., 2017, Nickson and Korczynski, 2009, Nickson et al., 2004). Studies about emotional and aesthetic labour typically focus on formal work in organisations or on formally recognised occupations (see e.g. Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993, Ashforth and Kreiner, 2002, Bolton, 2000, Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002, Isenbarger and Zembylas, 2006, Nickson and Korczynski, 2009, Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989, Warhurst and Nickson, 2001, Wharton, 1993, Witz et al., 2003). They reveal that actors work on the self, manage their emotions and their appearance but do so according to organisations' rules or according to formal and

informal professional norms and/ or client expectations (Bolton, 2005, Hochschild, 2012, Warhurst and Nickson, 2001). The other debate has emerged around the concepts of 'bio-politics and 'bio-power' that are based on the idea that individuals are part of a governing system that exercises power over their bodies and life processes – or aims at achieving 'subjugation of bodies and the control of populations' (Foucault, 1978: 140). However, the power over bodies, in particular, is not exercised through direct control but has become encoded into social practices (Foucault, 1978). Individuals are encouraged to work on the self, on their bodies and souls. In this sense, the enterprising self is seen as a self-disciplinary outcome of power. Although studies in this strand of thinking talk about governing practices linked to the human body and techniques that encourage self-management (Anderson, 2012, Lorey, 2009, Rabinow and Rose, 2006) they are fairly abstract and philosophical so that the areas of the self that people manage remain elusive. The descriptions range from processes linked to 'birth, death, production and illness' (Foucault, 2003: 243), disciplines of the body (Foucault, 1978: 139), to 'affective labour' (Hardt, 1999, Hardt and Negri, 2005), 'affect' (Negri and Hardt, 1999) or 'affective life' (Anderson, 2012). However, it is not always clear how these areas are defined, and how individuals manage them or what practices of self-management they use. Many of the studies that draw on the concept of 'bio-power' look at it 'from above' (Hardt, 1999: 98) and explore the production of value from various areas of 'life' (Anderson, 2012, Hardt, 1999, Negri and Hardt, 1999) or from power linkages (Foucault, 1978, Hardt and Negri, 2000) rather than how individuals work on themselves as an outcome of this power. Yet, the debate around 'bio-power' contributes to my study because it discusses the work on one's body and emotions as a mode of subjectification (Hardt, 1999, Rabinow and Rose, 2006) – a link that is weak in the debate that has emerged around the concept of 'emotional labour'. Another difference from the concept of 'emotional labour' is that self-governing practices in connection to 'bio-power' are discussed as something that is not limited to places of work but can extend to all areas of life (Negri and Hardt, 1999). To sum up, despite these differences, these two debates together have established 'body-work' as a form of work on the self and as an emerging mode of subjectification.

3.3.2 Career self-management

The second category refers to self-management practices that aim at building up one's career or managing employability. It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to provide an overview of the research on careers and employability or even an adequate overview of discussions that explore the aspect of self-management in careers. However, for the purpose of identifying the broad areas of self-management as part of the project of the self, it should suffice to emphasise that the self-directed approach is strongly present in the literature that talks about the shift in the coordination of careers (Huws, 2006). This debate makes a distinction between organisational, corporate careers that represent the old era and new career models in which the initiative is left to individuals to develop their own career (Arthur et al., 2000, Valenduc et al., 2009: 20). The new models that are defined outside the organisational settings are discussed as 'boundaryless', 'nomadic' or 'protean' careers as opposed to the 'bounded' or 'organisational' careers that are defined by organisational or professional rules (Alvarez, 2000, Arthur and Rousseau, 2001, Baines, 1999, Cadin et al., 2003, Guerrero et al., 2004, Hall and Moss, 1999). There is a wealth of literature that explores how individuals manage (or could manage) their careers independently, for instance through lifelong self-directed learning, continued skills development, accumulation of professional experience and developing relational networks (see e.g. Abele and Wiese, 2008, Drucker, 2005, Ensher et al., 2000, Gold and Fraser, 2002, Herriot and Stickland, 1996, Levinson, 1989). However, 'work on the self' can also take place within traditional organisations. In this case, workers are encouraged to work on their career and engage in self-management but they do so by following organisational rules (Arthur et al., 2000, Grey, 1994). There is a large literature that offers advice on how organisations can make their workers 'work on the self', take responsibility for their careers and get engaged in the management of their own employability (see e.g. Brockner and Lee, 1995, Kossek et al., 1998, Kuijpers and Scheerens, 2006, Sturges et al., 2010). Some of these authors draw on the idea that encouraging self-management is a more productive form of management control than disciplinary power (Grey, 1994: 495).

Self-management is strongly present in all of these discussions. However, individual career management is not a new concept. Independent professionals or entrepreneurs have been taking care of their careers for a long time (Baines, 1999, Iellatchitch et al., 2003). What is new is that some of the developments result from the increasing flexibility of the labour market that puts workers in a situation where they have no other choice than to take care of their careers (Huws, 2006: 126-128). In this case, career self-management is a response to uncertainties, an attempt to manage risks (Briscoe et al., 2012, Neff, 2012: 88) and a form of 'work on the self'. Thus building up one's career and maintaining employability throughout the working life has become an essential part in the path to forming the novel form of worker-subjectivity – the enterprising self (Grey, 1994: 495). Career self-management has been picked up separately in discussions about the enterprising self and brought forward as a form of 'work on the self' (Bröckling, 2002, Du Gay, 1996, Gill, 2010, Grey, 1994, Rose, 1992). However, the research about careers rarely discusses the work on one's employability as a mode of subjectification.

3.3.3 Self-directed organisation of daily work activities

The third area that I consider as part of the project of the self is linked to the daily organisation of work tasks. Depending on the job, the organisation and the profession, this can involve activities such as managing one's time, finances, and production processes, looking for new clients, monitoring one's work-related progress, meeting project deadlines or anticipating future developments (Gill, 2010, Neff, 2012, Ross, 2003). Many articles and books have been written on how workers manage various areas of work or could manage them more efficiently. These range from studies of time management (Lakein, 1973, Macan, 1996, McCay, 1959, Richards, 1987), to the literature on how to build up skills such as problem-solving, planning, self-motivation, self-assessment (see e.g. Palmer, 2007, Thomas et al., 2012). However, the purpose of this section is not to list the areas of research in this field but to establish a link between self-management of daily work processes and entrepreneurial worker subjectivity.

Workers who engage in self-organisation at work are frequently discussed as proactive, committed, having control over the labour process, involved, directing their own work and autonomous (Ashford and Black, 1996, Gill, 2010, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). However, many authors believe that the idea that workers are autonomous and can actually have control over the labour process is only possible when they have financial independence and the freedom to say no (see e.g. Burawoy, 1979, Cohen, 2016, Garrahan and Stewart, 1992, Huws, 2014, Kalff, 2017, Knights and Willmott, 2002, Lorey, 2009, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). For instance, Burawoy (1979) argues that workers who appear to have control over the labour process in organisations are in reality experiencing a reconfiguration of control relations. They are only given more choices 'within those ever narrower limits' – a matter that only obscures the reconfiguration of control relations (Burawoy, 1979: 87). Similarly, Cohen argues that even if independent workers control their immediate labour process, they are not able to control the 'broader conditions in which they work' (Cohen, 2016: 37) – a condition that puts limits on the way self-employed workers manage their daily work activities.

Although the self-directed approach is part of being an independent self-employed worker and is not a new phenomenon among workers in organisations (Muhr et al., 2012), these discussions are based on the idea that there is a shift in the locus of control from external, bureaucratic, direct or managerial control towards indirect, internalised control (Barker, 1993, Burawoy, 1979, Garrety and Down, 2015, Thompson and McHugh, 2009, Williams and Schneider, 2016). According to this thinking, self-organisation or a proactive approach at work is in reality an internalised form of managerial control (Burawoy, 1979, Garrahan and Stewart, 1992) or external conditions such as cultural norms, professional codes, uncertainties of the industry, precariousness of labour markets, socio-technical networks, market restrictions and pressures from clients (Cohen, 2016, Damarin, 2013, Deetz, 1998, Huws, 2010, Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009, Mazmanian et al., 2013, Muhr et al., 2012, Schörpf et al., 2017b). Workers manage their daily tasks, discipline themselves and work long hours as a result of these external pressures that they internalise or make their own. It is through this internalisation process that work identities are formed and new subjectivities constructed (Alvesson and

Willmott, 2002, Banks, 2007). It is thus the argument about the changing mode of control[5] and internalisation that links self-directed organisation of work activities to the debate about the enterprising self as a mode of subjectification. Although I presented here the organisation of daily work activities as a separate area of the self, there are overlaps with the other two categories because discussions about career management and the body-work on the self also draw on the concept of internalisation of external power. However, the difference is that critical authors who discuss the shifting locus of control see power and control predominantly as negative and exploitative whereas this is not explicit in other discussions (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998).

3.3.4 Relevance to the study and research questions

What areas of the self are managed, and what set of skills is needed for this self-management depends on the type of job, profession and organisation. For instance, Wissinger (2015) describes 'glamour labour' in the modelling industry as a project of the self that requires management of bodily appearance and work on one's career by keeping up with fashion trends, building up reputation in the industry and fostering networked connections (Wissinger, 2015: 3). Every profession and/ or organisation has its own norms and practices that define the combination of the areas that workers need to 'take care of'. Furthermore, how these areas are managed depends largely on organisational and professional norms. The three categories that I described in the previous sections are not exhaustive but provide an initial framework that helps explore the contours of the entrepreneurial subjectivity in the context of an emerging occupation. Very little is known about the areas of the self that virtual workers who operate outside formal employment relationship manage (Casilli, 2017). It is also not clear from

[5] Whether the mode of control is changing by replacing traditional forms of control or whether external and internal control co-exist is a contested issue. Callaghan, G. & Thompson, P. (2001) 'Edwards revisited: technical control and call centres'. *Economic and Industrial Democracy,* 22 (1) pp. 13-37, Thompson, P. & Harley, B. (2007) 'HRM and the Worker: Labour Procss Perspectives'. In*:* BOXALL, P., PURCELL, J. & WRIGHT, P. (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Human Resource Management.* (2007). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

where such isolated workers derive the norms and values that help construct the entrepreneurial worker subjectivity.

In the context of professional poker players, various studies including the early research about offline poker players have established that a distinctive feature of professional poker playing is self-management. In particular the management of emotions, financial losses, control over working hours and the ability to manage finances are the features that help distinguish a professional from a recreational player (Bjerg, 2010, Hayano, 1977, Hayano, 1982, Hayano, 1984, McCormack and Griffiths, 2012, Radburn and Horsley, 2011, Weinstock et al., 2013). For instance, Hayano (1982) found that the core of professional poker-playing is managing uncertainties, risks, hazard and instability that players face on a daily basis. Professional players are those who strive to win by constructing a system of strategies for the management of 'luck', and are able to manage the negative emotions caused by losses (Hayano, 1982). According to Radburn and Horsley (2011), professional poker players practice control across different domains such as occupational, cognitive and emotional control. Although these studies suggest that professional poker players manage different areas of the self, respond to uncertainties and risks and show similar characteristics to professions in which workers have adopted the entrepreneurial subjectivity, these findings are of limited use to my study. Firstly, they do not focus on professional online pokers players as a separate category but either on both offline and online poker players as a single interchangeable category (Bjerg, 2010, Dufour et al., 2015, McCormack and Griffiths, 2012, Radburn and Horsley, 2011) or on gamblers in general (Weinstock et al., 2013) – a category that includes a range of games. Some of the studies only focus on offline poker players (Hayano, 1977, Hayano, 1982). To my knowledge, self-management as a distinctive feature of professional players has not been researched separately among those who play online. Secondly, the existing research about professional poker players has not been linked to debates about the enterprising self. There are no studies about self-management among professional online poker players as a form of worker-subjectivity. Self-management has only been explored as a criterion that differentiates them from

'other', non-professional players. These gaps lead to the following two sub-questions addressed in the thesis:

1. What areas of work or the self are professional online poker players managing?
2. How do they manage themselves?

The aim of my study is not to establish whether professional online poker players have adopted the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity because the first pioneering studies have already suggested this. I am concerned with how the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity manifests in these workers. Answers to these two questions can help shed light on this matter.

It is also known that professional poker players do not start over night but graduate from recreational playing (Hayano, 1977, Istrate, 2011). This suggests that they form the idea of themselves as professional players in a process, which in turn suggests that (at least) part of their entrepreneurial subjectivity is constructed during the period of transition. In order to understand if and how the entrepreneurial self is constructed in this process, I want to explore the transition period by asking a third sub-question:

3. How do poker players graduate from recreational into professional playing?

By asking this question, I am particularly interested in finding answers to how players form the idea of themselves as professional players and how this is accepted as such by others. Several authors have suggested that self-management is intertwined with work identity or that it can be seen as a form of identity management (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, Neff et al., 2005: 308). However, little is known about how poker players form the idea of themselves as professionals. Existing studies suggest that being a professional poker player may be regarded in some quarters as ethically dubious, if not stigmatising, making it socially difficult to publicly acknowledge this identity (Hayano, 1977, Radburn and Horsley, 2011). Due to a lack of formal recognition as work it is not clear what constitutes a professional player. Professional poker

players may be stigmatised as deviant, and people who call themselves professional poker players may find themselves overshadowed by reports about problem and pathological gambling (Bjerg, 2010, Dufour et al., 2015, Hing et al., 2016, Radburn and Horsley, 2011). My concern is to understand to what extent the construction of the managed self is based on a normative idea of what a professional player looks like and an identification with other professional players (Istrate, 2011). There is a large literature about occupational identity. However, this is not my concern here: my focus is on the construction of the entrepreneurial self as an ongoing process of which the formation of identity as a professional player and its validation is possibly one component.

Answers to these three sub-questions will help understand the degree to which professional online poker players have adopted the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity and how. This forms the basis for exploring the effects the 'work on the self' has on isolated virtual workers – a topic that I explore in the following section.

3.4 Self-management, conflicting relations of autonomy and their effects on workers

There is an increasing number of authors who argue that in order for the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity to emerge, workers need to feel autonomous (Charalambides, 2017, Kalff, 2017, Lorey, 2009, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). Paradoxically, this is even (or perhaps especially) the case when an employer exercises control over the worker, or when an individual is in reality constrained by external factors (Kalff, 2017, Muhr et al., 2012). Some authors argue that autonomy and hegemonic modes of subjectification are linked in Western capitalism (Lorey, 2009). However, there is something deeply conflicted about this connection or the relations of autonomy in the context of the entrepreneurial self.

The enterprising self is often discussed as an autonomous subject (Du Gay, 1996, Elias et al., 2017, Gorz, 2003a, Rose, 1992). It is common for workers, especially for those in culture and new media industries (that are presented as the forerunners of entrepreneurial labour) to be drawn to autonomy (Florida, 2000, Gill, 2010, Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013, Huws, 2014, Michailidou and Kostala, 2016, Neff et al., 2005, Ross, 2003). Working online and at a distance is also widely promoted as a way to achieve more autonomy (Huws, 1997, Mazmanian et al., 2013, Pitts, 2016, Schörpf et al., 2017a, Webster and Randle, 2016). Huws (1997) argued that many choose this type of work in the hope they will achieve a better quality of life through control over their working time and more time for their families and leisure time activities. However, often the opposite is the case and instead of more flexibility, workers find themselves in a situation where their working days are long, unpredictable and defined by external pressures (Huws, 1997). Authors vary in terms of the degree to which they see self-managing workers as actually having autonomy. While the mainstream management literature tends to suggest that proactive and self-regulating workers are autonomous (if they happen to talk about the workers' perspective) (Campbell, 2000, Manz and Sims, 1980, Seibert et al., 2004, Unsworth and Parker, 2003), more critical authors show that often the opposite is the case and that this apparent autonomy is underpinned by extreme forms of self-management that are themselves a form of external control (Charalambides, 2017, Damarin, 2013, Garrahan and Stewart, 1992, Huws, 1997, Mazmanian et al., 2013) as I have previously shown. Many authors argue that the conflicting relations of autonomy are linked to changes in the power relationship (Huws, 1997, Kalff, 2017, Lorey, 2009, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016, Schörpf et al., 2017b). For instance, Kalff (2017: 21) stated:

This self is conflicted: it relies on autonomy and yet is disciplined and controlled in labour processes, biographies, and life plans. In not dissolving, yet maintaining this ambivalent tension, the project regime produces a power structure and constitutes an obscured antinomy of predictability and flexibility.

Studies that explore these contradictions also point out that workers do not necessarily feel restricted in their autonomy (Burawoy, 1979, Lupu and Empson, 2015, Mazmanian et al., 2013, Michel, 2011). These conflicting accounts have been described as an 'autonomy paradox' (Huws, 1996, Lupu and Empson, 2015, Mazmanian et al., 2013, Michel, 2011), 'caged discretion' (Muhr et al., 2012), 'obscured autonomy' (Charalambides, 2017), 'a false sense of autonomy' (Deetz, 1998) and an 'illusion of autonomy' (Kalff, 2017). Although the debate about the power relationship and its effects is relatively new in the context of the enterprising self, it is not new in wider labour market analyses. It overlaps with the debate about flexible employment and its profoundly ambiguous interrelationships between autonomy and power that feminist writers began discussing in the early 1980s. They revealed a conflicting interplay between employers' need for flexibility and workers' autonomy: employees often pay the price for employers' need for a flexible workforce (Cranford et al., 2003, Fudge and Vosko, 2003, Huws et al., 1989, McKie et al., 1999, Rubery, 1989). I recognise that there is a wider debate about autonomy and power relationships. However, the aim of my research is not to resolve any of these paradoxes or contribute to these discussions but to explore whether similar patterns exist among professional online poker players. I am interested in the debate about obscured and conflicting relations of autonomy in so far as this is discussed as a component in the production of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity (Marques, 2017). Thus in order to study the contours of the enterprising self among professional online poker players, I ask the following question.

4. To what extent are professional online poker players genuinely autonomous? Is this autonomy constrained?

This leads to a discussion about the effects that the self-management born out of these conflicting relations has on the quality of workers' life. The mainstream management literature typically presumes a positive, beneficial impact of self-management on workers, on their selves, work performance, job satisfaction and their identity (King, 2004, Kirkman and Rosen, 1999, Seibert et al., 2004, Stewart and Manz, 1995). Also the neoliberal ideal of a self-managing, entrepreneurial worker is presented in much of the literature as positive, productive and

beneficial to everyone but most notably to those who practice it (Drucker, 2005, Gershon, 2011, Gorz, 2003a, Rose, 1992). However, there is an emerging body of literature that explores the hidden cost, dark side or negative effects self-management has on workers' daily life and wellbeing. The areas most affected can be broadly divided into four categories: pace and intensity of work, work-life balance, job security, and emotional and physical wellbeing. These areas are partly interconnected, often discussed by the same authors and can therefore not easily be separated. However, for the purpose of this analyses I present them separately because this facilitates the analysis and search for similar patterns among professional online poker players.

Firstly, it has been suggested that self-management results in work intensification and heavy work load with workers voluntarily working long hours and having less time for leisure, their families and friends (Burchell, 2002, Kelliher and Anderson, 2010, Muhr et al., 2012, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016, Ross, 2003). This trend is particularly visible among highly qualified knowledge workers (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009, Muhr et al., 2012, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). Some authors talk about self-exploitation in this context and argue that work intensification is mostly self-driven (Moosbrugger, 2008, Muhr et al., 2012, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). Secondly, self-management blurs the boundary between work and leisure, the private and professional self and the line between work colleagues, friends and family (Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, Johnsen et al., 2009, Michel, 2011, Ross, 2003). However, there is a parallel trend. Ross (2003) found that for some workers being busy or time poverty had become more valuable or prestigious than having time for leisure. Thirdly, the enterprising self has recently been linked to the debate about precariousness and job insecurity (Burchell, 2002, Charalambides, 2017, Kalff, 2017, Lorey, 2009, Marques, 2017, Norkus et al., 2016). Here the main argument is that individuals work on different areas of the self because this helps them handle the risks and uncertainties they are exposed to but at the same time these practices leave them trapped in the same precarious situation they are struggling with (Norkus et al., 2016, Ross, 2003). According to Lorey (2009), the enterprising self both produces and maintains precariousness. Paradoxically, these uncertainties can also be reasons why

workers accept intensification of work (Campbell, 2002). Similarly to the debate about work intensification, some authors talk also about conditions of self-exploitation in this context (Norkus et al., 2016). Fourthly, the precariousness, work intensification and negative work-life balance that the enterprising self produces or maintains affect workers' emotional and physical wellbeing. Many authors have shown how work under these conditions can create stress and anxiety (Banks, 2007, Casey, 1999, Eurofound, 2009), physical and emotional fatigue (Barnes and Van Dyne, 2009), 'emotional churning' (Ross, 2003), burnout (Hochschild, 2012, Moosbrugger, 2008) or depression (Ehrenberg, 2010). Studies have shown that, in particular, practices of self-management that aim at managing emotions can create heavy emotional strains in workers (Hochschild, 1985, Pugliesi, 1999).

The debates about emotional and physical stress at work, work intensification, work-life balance and precariousness are not new. There is a considerable literature around each of the four areas I have presented here. However, it is outside the aims and scope of this study to discuss all these areas more profoundly. What is new is that researchers have started linking the debate about the managing self to these (partly) old and already existing debates. The key aspect that holds these debates together is the autonomy paradox. There is an emerging consensus that it is the subjectification process, work on the self and precisely these conflicting relations of autonomy or what is described as the 'autonomy paradox' that make workers particularly vulnerable to work intensification, precarisation and exploitation (Burawoy, 1979, Charalambides, 2017, Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013, Lorey, 2009, Lupu and Empson, 2015, Menger, 1999, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). Lorey (2009) found that individuals who work on the self as part of their job can be exploited more easily because they believe in their own autonomy. The desire for autonomy can also be experienced as a source of stress and anxiety (Cohen, 2016). However, it is not known whether management of the self in virtual work creates the same types of effects as its counterpart in formal occupations and organisations that most of these authors base their studies on.

There is no research about the effects of self-management among professional online poker players. However, a few studies and newspaper articles describe problems that professional players face and hint at similar negative consequences to those that other self-regulating workers struggle with. Professional players are believed to face problems that are linked to work-life balance and emotional health rather than to the financial loss that is associated with amateur problem gambling (Bjerg, 2010, Hing et al., 2015, Hing et al., 2016, McCormack and Griffiths, 2012). They struggle with balancing their work in relation to life outside: interpersonal problems, negative impact on their work and studies, disrupted sleeping and irregular eating patterns (Bjerg, 2010, Hing et al., 2015). However, Griffith challenges this by suggesting that some of these problems, especially the loss of time, are linked to online poker in general (Griffiths et al., 2010). Another set of problems is linked to health: severe psychological distress, emotional and physical exhaustion (Hing et al., 2015). For instance, an anonymous player whose article was published in The Guardian captured the essence of the mental and physical exhaustion professional poker playing can cause:

By the end of November my mental health was tied together by string. I had chronic insomnia, tinnitus, suicidal thoughts; weight slipped off me and as if that wasn't enough – and, frankly, I felt like it was – I developed exploding head syndrome.(The Guardian, 2016)

The same anonymous writer described his or her difficulties that were linked to the informal character of poker as work:

I am 40 now and any hopes of a life consisting of 'normal' things – a mortgage, starting a family, hobbies – have all but gone. Poker has put me out of fringes of society. [...] A reasonable question here might be: why don't you go and do something less financially precarious and mentally damaging instead? The thing is, I still find poker fascinating. The axiom of it taking five minutes to learn and a lifetime to master has never felt truer. Also, I am in a corner. I'm not sure if I could do anything else with such yawning gaps in my CV – or if I want to. (The Guardian, 2016)

Although these studies provide an initial idea of the problems that professional online poker players face, it is not clear what causes them. The possibility that they could be caused by practices of self-management and the conflicting relations of autonomy has not been considered yet. It is also not clear whether the problems professional online poker players face are the same as of those who play offline and what is their implication in the long term. Even if online poker can be seen as a viable occupation, form of work or source of income in the short term it is not clear to what extent it is sustainable in the long term or whether it is only a temporary stage in people's lives. To address these gaps in the literature and in order to explore the dynamics of autonomy and self-management among professional online poker players or among virtual workers with no publicly recognised identities, I ask the following questions.

5. What are the personal costs and benefits of self-management among professional online poker players?
6. What are the implications of this for long-term sustainability of professional online poker playing as an occupation?

Answers to these sub-questions will shed light on how the enterprising self manifests in virtual work and the impact its practices have on shaping an emerging occupation. Chapters 5-8 discuss the data collected in interviews and focus on finding answers to the questions presented here.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed the literature in the light of the main research question: How do isolated online workers manage themselves in the absence of formal organisational control or socially recognised occupational norms, and what are the effects of this self-management on the quality of their working lives? Drawing on this question, the chapter has studied the literature on various modes and practices of acting on the self in the context of work. It has provided an account of the variety of terms and definitions that describe the trend towards

managing multiple areas of the self which has also been discussed as the emerging new form of worker-subjectivity. It has found that although these subject matters are widely discussed, the literature provides little guidance on how to study the trend in the context of an occupation that is outside the 'standard'. Based on the existing literature, I have developed a framework that helps explore practices of self-management and self-control in emerging online occupations.

I have identified three areas of the self that workers in formal occupations manage. These include body-work-practices of the self, career self-management and self-directed organisation of daily work activities. Although professional poker players practice self-management, little is known about how they do so, about the areas of the self that they manage, whether they follow any professional norms in this regard and to what degree they have adopted the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity. I have also shown how the production of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity relies on conflicting relations of autonomy, and how these dynamics have magnified some of the negative effects of self-management on workers' lives. However, it is not known whether self-management and self-control among isolated virtual workers create the same type of negative effects and whether they rely on similar conflicting relations. Despite the wealth of literature about various practices of self-management and self-control in formal occupations, these dynamics have not been researched in the context of an emerging online occupation. In order to address this gap, I formulated the following research sub-questions.

1. What areas of work or the self are professional online poker players managing?
2. How do they manage themselves?
3. How do poker players graduate from recreational into professional playing?
4. To what extent are professional online poker players genuinely autonomous? Is this autonomy constrained?
5. What are the personal costs and benefits of self-management among professional online poker players?

6. What are the implications of this for long-term sustainability of professional online poker playing as an occupation?

These guiding questions help explore the contours of the entrepreneurial subjectivity in the context of an emerging online occupation, and the effects it has on its workers.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter reflects on the research strategy that was adopted in this study, and describes the methods that were used to get access to professional online poker players, gather information about their experiences and make sense of the information that was collected in the process. Firstly, it provides an account of the research design and its theoretical underpinnings. Secondly, it gives a rational for using constructivist grounded theory. Thirdly, it clarifies the expected research outcome. Fourthly, it describes the characteristics of the sample, and how data was gathered and analysed. It finishes with a conclusion.

4.2 Rationale behind the research design and theoretical underpinnings

This section provides the rationale for adopting an exploratory approach, doing qualitative research and using grounded theory as an overall research strategy. It also describes the reasons for positioning the research in the interpretative tradition of research, and the challenges I faced as a researcher in this regard.

4.2.1 Exploring an unknown phenomenon and hidden population

The choice of doing qualitative research, adopting an exploratory approach as an overall principle or framework, grounded theory as the methodological approach and in-depth interviews as the method for data collection largely evolved around the unknown character of professional online poker. There was no research about professional online poker players when I began designing the study in 2011. As shown in Chapter 2, gambling has been of interest to many researchers. However, the focus of existing studies has largely been on recreational problem gamblers but not on those who aim to make a living out of poker. The few pioneering studies about professional online poker players that I referred to in Chapter 2 were only published during the course of my research. However, none of these

studies look at the phenomenon through the lens of labour sociology as is the case here. Except for the research by Hayano (1977, 1982, 1984), there are no studies of professional offline poker players. Thus it remains a largely unknown phenomenon. Because of lack of research there was no body of literature or set of theories from which to derive hypotheses when I began designing the study. It also became quickly clear that professional poker players are a hard to reach, 'hidden population' (Atkinson and Flint, 2001, Sydor, 2013). There are no institutions or organisations I could contact for finding out more about online poker as a work activity or for recruiting respondents. The assumption that online gambling largely takes place in an informal world was confirmed by my first exploratory interviews. These two characteristics informed the choice of research strategy in the study.

There is a broad agreement that exploratory approach that is based on inductive reasoning is most suitable for studying an unknown phenomenon or unstudied topic (Adler and Clark, 2003: 12, Blumer, 1986: 40, Palys, 1997: 78) and developing new knowledge (Boulding, 1958: 5, Lofland, 1995, Stebbins, 2001: 8, Vogt and Johnson, 2011: 134). Blumer (1986: 40) defined exploration as a

[...] flexible procedure in which the scholar shifts from one to another line of inquiry, adopts new points of observation as his study progresses, moves in new directions previously unthought of, and changes his recognition of what are relevant data as he acquires more information and better understanding.

However, suggestions regarding the process and the outcomes of this mode of enquiry vary. In terms of possible outcomes of exploratory approach, suggestions range from descriptive accounts (Blumer, 1986: 42), plausible explanations (Adler and Clark, 2003: 12) and 'a notion of the field' (Boulding, 1958: 6) to empirical generalisations (Stebbins, 2001: 9) or theory-building (Stebbins, 2001: 52). There are two contrasting views with regard to the research process of exploratory approach. According to the first view, it is seen as a preliminary phase before hypothesis testing. In particular, deductivists tend to see exploratory research as a mere 'warm-up' phase which helps identify research questions and

operationalise variables before the 'real' study begins (Palys, 1997: 79). According to the other view, it is seen as the principal research approach that leads to the desired research outcomes (Stebbins, 2001). However, even if it is adopted as the main approach, the drawback of the exploratory approach is that it does not provide researchers with concrete techniques and tools. This thesis adopts an exploratory approach as an overall principle or framework, especially its guiding principles 'flexibility' and 'openness' with regard to the choice of tools and methods. To address the lack of concrete techniques and tools, this study makes use of the grounded theory approach that also requires a high degree of openness and flexibility but provides a more solid framework for exploring unstudied social phenomena (Charmaz, 2014, Charmaz and Bryant, 2011, Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The next section describes the epistemological underpinnings of the study and their importance for the research process.

4.2.2 Seeing the reality through participants' eyes

It is widely believed that research methods are underpinned by philosophical assumptions, especially about the nature of knowledge and reality. Epistemology is the strand of philosophy that is concerned with questions around the nature of knowledge such as 'What is acceptable knowledge?', 'How is it produced?' while ontology is concerned with the nature of reality and is interested in questions such as 'Is there a social reality?', 'In what form it exists?', 'Do social and natural worlds exist in similar ways?' (Maxwell, 2011, Ormston et al., 2014: 4-6, Soini and Kronqvist, 2011, Willis and Jost, 2007). As discussed previously, this study is concerned with understanding and explaining online poker as a form of work. The research questions, as formulated in Chapter 3, expect a detailed description of how players interpret and perceive their activity, their experiences – an account of their subjective view. To meet these research objectives, I chose qualitative interviewing as the method for data collection (Bryman, 2016). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011a: 3) qualitative research refers to 'situated activity that locates the observer in the world' and qualitative researchers are people who 'study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret

phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them'. Although grounded theory is suitable for both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection (Charmaz, 2014: 228), the latter are believed to be the most suitable for studying the way people construct and interpret social reality (Atkinson et al., 2001).

The epistemological position of qualitative interviewing is often described as interpretivist because it tries to understand the social world by looking at it through the eyes of its participants (Bryman, 2016: 375). The interpretive paradigm[6] is based on the idea that knowledge is constructed through reflection, understanding and interpretation of the social world (Bryman, 2016, Ormston et al., 2014). Also the constructivist grounded theory that this study follows (and that I describe in more detail in Section 4.3) is seen as part of the interpretative tradition (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). When I began studying online poker players, it became quickly clear that the definition of professional playing largely depends on participants' subjective view and that 'looking through participants' eyes' (Bryman, 2016: 394) is essential for studying these players as a category separate from recreational players. Thus, from an epistemological point of view, the choice of research strategy, the method of data collection, and the importance of seeing the reality through poker players' eyes place this study in the interpretive paradigm.

However, placing research in a single epistemological paradigm is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, some authors argue that research methods, and in particular qualitative research methods, draw on or could be conducted from a variety of epistemological perspectives (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011a, Maxwell, 2011). Secondly, there are many paradigm-related disputes that have not been settled (Bryman, 2008). This leaves the boundaries between paradigms blurred (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011b: 95). Qualitative research and interpretivism are often defined in opposition to a positivist view that is based on the idea that an objective reality exists, and that both natural world and human behaviour can be

[6] Paradigm refers here to a 'set of beliefs that guides action' Ormston, R., Spencer, L., Barnard, M. & Snape, D. (2014) 'The Foundations of Qualitative Research'. In*:* RITCHIE, J., LEWIS, J., MCNAUGHTON NICHOLLS, C. & ORMSTON, R. (eds.) *Qualitative Research Practice: A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers* (2014). London: Sage Publications.

studied by means of scientific methods (Ormston et al., 2014: 24, Willis and Jost, 2007: 12-13). However, historically, qualitative research was defined within the positivist paradigm with researchers simply doing research with 'less rigorous methods' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011a: 9). Some authors believe that there is still a shadow of positivist tradition lingering over qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011a: 9). For research practices, this means that the distinction between positivism and interpretivism is not always straightforward.

Despite these concerns, it is believed that greater acceptance of findings can be gained when the research process is linked to philosophical debates (Ormston et al., 2014: 2), and that epistemology helps formulate research questions and find appropriate answers (Soini and Kronqvist, 2011: 6). This refers to a debate around the question of whether an empirical researcher needs to be aware of underlying philosophical assumptions and engage in those debates, or whether it is enough to focus on available research tools (Seale, 1999, Snape and Spencer, 2003: 17-18). I adopt the view that it is important to be aware of philosophical underpinnings of research tools (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011b: 95) but the focus of the study should be on choosing the ones that best serve the research objectives and not on engaging in these philosophical debates. This standpoint is supported by Seale (1999: 466) who considers research as a craft skill 'relatively autonomous from social theory or philosophy, yet drawing on these arenas of discourse as a resource'. By adopting grounded theory as a research strategy and using qualitative interviewing, this study has inevitably inherited the unresolved issues and ongoing battles (Bryman, 2008) that they are surrounded by. However, I do not attempt to resolve any of these contested issues but I use them as tools that contribute to meeting the research objectives. The next section is about the role of the researcher in the research process that is shaped by interpetivist beliefs and assumptions, and about my personal journey in this regard.

4.2.3 Journey from confirmation to discovery

The interpetivist paradigm sees the researcher as an active participant in the research process whose personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity shape the outcome of the research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011a: 5). Denzin and Lincoln (2011a: 4) called this researcher an 'interpretive bricoleur' who produces bricolage - 'a pieced-together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation'. I belong to the group of researchers trained in what Stebbins (2001: 15) has called 'confirmatory research'. This training helps me to derive and verify hypotheses and follow the relatively classical route of research: literature review – identification of a research problem – data collection – analysis – writing (Stebbins, 2001: 15). This type of research is valid so long as there are sufficient theories available to derive hypotheses. It implies that someone else has already identified a research problem and explored the phenomenon under study. However, training in confirmatory research becomes redundant and can even hinder research when a phenomenon has not been explored and when there is no existing body of literature to derive a hypothesis from (Stebbins, 2001: 15) as was the case for professional online poker playing. I realised quickly that studying an unknown phenomenon required a different set of skills and tools. The most challenging part of the research process, especially at the beginning, was for me to learn how to 'bracket my earlier training and take the mantle of discovery' as described by Stebbins (2001). Thus the journey of designing and conducting the study that I describe in this chapter was for me also a personal journey from confirmation to discovery. By describing the process of research, I also hope to 'educate' those readers who are similarly trained in confirmatory research. I hope that this chapter provides them with sufficient guidance for how to evaluate the study through a lens of discovery. According to Stebbins (2001: 30), exploratory research is too often evaluated through the prism of confirmatory research, which is inappropriate as the process of discovery is different from theory testing.

4.3 Rationale for using constructivist grounded theory

As indicated above, this research follows the grounded theory approach. Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and refers to the development of theory that is grounded in data and the iterative process of data collection and analysis (Bryman, 2016: 381). It has its roots in symbolic interactionism which looks at how people interpret and react to their environment (Bryman, 2016: 381). It is also influenced by both positivist and interpretivist way of thinking and allows both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection (Snape and Spencer, 2003: 12). Grounded theory has been suggested as particularly suitable for studying looser-knit social systems or so called 'small worlds' (Charmaz, 2014: 228) such as gangs and other informal world activities (Wiseman and Aron, 1970) which is the case for professional online poker, as previously explained. This is largely because the size and characteristics of these hidden populations are often not known and difficult to assess. Grounded theory uses theoretical sampling where a researcher collects data until theoretical categories are filled out with data and not for ensuring that the sample is representative of the larger group under study (Rose, 1982). It is 'responsive to the data' and particularly suitable for 'studying new and uncharted areas' (Glaser and Strauss, 2008). In this study, I used theoretical sampling largely because, as shown in Chapter 2, the number of professional online poker players has not been adequately assessed and the characteristics of such a group of players were not known.

The drawback of grounded theory as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is that it does not allow any preconceived ideas, and it precludes the possibility of being theoretically informed when entering the field. Entering the field with an empty mind has been criticized by a number of authors (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 144-145). In this study, I drew on concepts from sociology of work in order to make sense of online poker as a form of work and to design the interview schedule. This was necessary because the study is concerned with professional and not with recreational poker players. Therefore, grounded theory in its original form was not suitable.

Since the initial publication of the book by Glaser and Strauss in 1967, the methodology has matured, evolved into different approaches and seen the emergence of constructivist and objectivist grounded theory (see e.g. Allan, 2003, Bulmer, 1979, Rose, 1982: 127). Constructivist grounded theory is part of the interpretative tradition and resolves some of the problems associated with the early grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, Corbin and Strauss, 2008, Mills et al., 2006). It acknowledges subjectivities and that the research process, including the construction of a theory, is influenced by the researcher's perspective (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). It gives more guidance than the earlier version of grounded theory on how data should be collected (Charmaz, 2014: 239). Objectivist grounded theory derives from positivism, and emphasises the importance of generalisations and distance from researcher's perspectives (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011). My research adopts the constructivist grounded theory approach, especially its guiding principles such as subjective interpretation of data, flexibility, openness and active interplay with data (Charmaz, 2006: 131). It draws on its procedures and techniques for collecting and analysing qualitative data. The next section discusses the expected outcome of the research process.

4.4 Expected outcome of the research

What should be the product of a study that explores an unknown phenomenon and hidden population? What form should a study of an unexplored topic and its data analysis take? There is no straightforward answer to this. Suggestions range from a theory, concept, proposition and generalisation to a mere description of an area of social life. This section looks at some of the difficulties in relation to defining the expected research outcome. I analyse it from the perspective of grounded theory and the exploratory research approach that I follow in this study.

As already shown in Section 4.2.1, there are a number of suggestions with regard to a possible outcome of exploratory approach as a mode of enquiry. For instance, Adler and Clark (2003: 12-13) suggest that exploration of an unstudied topic should aim to develop a plausible explanation, 'an accurate and precise picture' or

a theory. Similarly, Palys (1997: 78) argues that exploration is 'a base from which theory might emerge' but it can also be used to simply acquire new insights. In contrast, Blumer (1986: 42-43) suggests a two-step approach according to which an unexplored topic should aim to produce a descriptive account first, be followed up by inspection or 'an intensive focused examination' and yield in theoretical propositions. Thus exploratory approach does not prescribe a concrete outcome of the research.

In contrast, grounded theory is presented as a strategy for generating theory out of data. However, this claim is charged with problems. Firstly, there are different understandings of what constitutes a theory (Charmaz, 2006: 125, Lynham, 2000: 165). For instance according to Charmaz (2011: 363) and Stebbins (2001: 52), a theory can constitute a description, an empirical generalisation, generic concept, relationship between variables or an abstract understanding of relationships between concepts. Rose (1982: 127) defines a theory as a set of systematically related sociological propositions. Glaser and Strauss (2008) distinguish between substantive theory, which reflects an empirical area of sociology, and formal theory, which is more abstract and is developed for a conceptual area. Theories can also be divided into Grand Theories (Mills, 1959) that are produced from logical assumptions and theories that are grounded in data (see e.g. Charmaz, 2014, Corbin and Strauss, 2008, Glaser and Strauss, 2008). Secondly, theories of these different traditions have shortcomings. Grand Theory, for instance, is criticized for neglecting the empirical world or for 'the emptiness of theory without data' (Mills, 1959: 66). In contrast, theories grounded in data are criticized for not always reaching the standards of a theory (Charmaz, 2011: 363). Some authors argue that grounded theory as a research strategy is more suitable for generating concepts rather than theories (Silverman, 2005: 71, Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 101). The term 'concept' refers to 'clearly specified ideas deriving from a particular model' (Silverman, 2005: 70-71). In grounded theory approach, concepts are considered as 'building blocks of a theory' and are generated through open coding (Bryman, 2016: 381, 575).

In this research, I take into consideration the critique of grounded theory and combine it with the view of Stebbins (2001: 9) who suggested that a study of an unexplored topic should first and foremost aim at generating new concepts and empirical generalisations – a theory can be developed but is not essential. I aim to develop an empirically informed conceptual framework as a primary goal of this study. The next section is concerned with the research process.

4.5 Research process: sampling, data gathering and analysis

Grounded theory is compatible with a number of research methods. However, there is no straightforward answer to what tools are the most appropriate ones. In many cases, different tools and techniques can lead to the same outcome. In addition to choosing the right tools, it has been argued that a good scientist also needs 'quality of mind' (Bryman, 2016: 580) and a good measure of 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1959: 5) to make sense of the complex social world. Openness to research tools, flexibility and creativity are conducive to this sociological imagination. In this study, I adopt the approach of an 'intellectual craftsmanship' or one that nurtures 'sociological imagination' (Corbin and Strauss, 2008: 12). According to this, tools and research methods should be used to inspire research and not be taken as directives. In this section, I describe how the research was undertaken with regard to data collection and analysis. The first section describes the journey that took me from my initial interest in studying gold farming as a form of virtual work towards studying professional online poker players. I then explain the recruitment process. The third section sheds light on the characteristics of the sample. This is followed by an account of the interview process and reflections on research ethics. The last part gives insights into the analysis of data and issues linked to the use of different languages in the interview process.

4.5.1 Process that led to studying online poker players

This section describes the journey that took me from my initial interest in studying gold farming as a form of virtual work towards studying professional

online poker players. I began this research with a broad interest in emerging new forms of virtual work, in particular the 'unseen' kinds with no visible occupational identities[7]. This interest stemmed from previous work experience at the International Labour Organization (ILO) and from studies in computer science and development economics at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen that had awakened an interest in questions about digital technologies, work and employment. In search of 'hidden' forms of virtual work I discovered 'gold farming' that was in the news a lot when I began the research in 2011. 'Gold farming' refers to labour activities that are based on the production and reselling of virtual goods and services for 'real' money in MMORPGs (Heeks, 2008: 2). However, apart from media interest and a few studies focusing on such workers predominantly in Asian countries (see e.g. Dibbell, 2007a, Heeks, 2008, Heeks, 2010, Nakamura, 2009, Nardi and Ming Kow, 2010, Wang, 2006), the topic was largely unexplored, in particular in the European context. Encouraged by a hint in a publication by Lee (2005) who mentioned Romania as a possible European location where gold farming may happen and an article in The Guardian (Thompson, 2005) that suggested the same, I investigated a number of ways of accessing gold farmers in European countries. Firstly, I developed an online survey that turned out not to be successful. Secondly, I interviewed two gold farmers in the UK. The survey was created in English, Russian and Spanish, containing 33 questions (see Appendix B). It focused on the game World of Warcraft (WOW) as it was the largest and most popular MMORPG (Heeks, 2008). The goal of the survey was to explore gold farming practices and to recruit interview respondents. However from 34 respondents only one indicated that he or she had used WOW to earn money. Six of the respondents indicated that they had played online poker in the last 12 months. Between December 2012 and February 2013, I conducted two in-depth interviews with UK based professional online gamers. Although this gave me invaluable insights into an emerging form of virtual work and confirmed its existence in the European context, I realised that

[7] I am grateful to Professor Vili Lehdonvirta for his talk in the session 'The Development Potential of the Virtual Economy: Towards a Knowledge Map' at the 4th International Conference on Information and Communication Technologies where I first learned about these forms of virtual work. The conference was organised by Royal Holloway University of London and took place on 13-16th December 2010.

gold farming seemed to be quite a transient form of work, with many of the players moving away from it towards other online activities, including gambling. Interview data later confirmed the close linkage between online gaming and gambling. It also became quickly clear that accessing the community of gold farmers required knowledge of basic game rules and most importantly knowledge of the community slang and game-specific vocabulary. However, I did not have the time and resources to familiarise myself with the World of Warcraft or any other MMORPGs. Discussions with other researchers in the field of online games revealed that the complexity of these games required at least three months of intense playing. The results from the online survey and the early interviews with gold farmers suggested that gold farming was dwarfed in importance by the growth of online poker as a source of income, at least in Europe. I decided to refocus my attention on to online poker as an income generating activity.

When I looked deeper into online poker I found that (a) it was very under-studied (in fact not at all as a form of work) and (b) it did genuinely seem to constitute a viable form of work in that people were able to make a living from doing it. So I refocussed my research on this activity without ever losing sight of my original broader interest in 'hidden' and emerging new forms of virtual work and the ways in which these workers perceive themselves and manage themselves as workers. As the next section shows, the community of professional online poker players was relatively easily accessible and the early interviews did not suggest that game-specific knowledge was required for data gathering. In fact, it seemed to be more advantageous to enter the community of poker players as an 'interested' outsider rather than an insider.

4.5.2 Getting access to respondents

Getting access to the 'hard-to-reach' population (Abrams, 2010) of professional online poker players was of key importance for the course of this research. In order to access online poker players (or gold farmers first), I used a mixture of recruitment methods, opportunistically seeking to find a range of players by word of mouth and other means. Initially, I planned to use the snowball method that

involves asking research participants to identify other potential respondents with similar criteria (Ritchie et al., 2003: 94). Snowballing is often used to access hidden populations which are difficult to access (see e.g. Abrams, 2010, Atkinson and Flint, 2001, Van de Goor et al., 1994). This was also the case with professional online poker players and gold farmers. However, the snowballing technique requires an initial sample of participants (Atkinson and Flint, 2001), which I expected to get through the online survey, but was not successful (see Section 4.5.1). In addition to the online survey about WOW players, I created (in parallel) a similar survey that aimed at identifying professional online poker players to be interviewed. However, the experience with the survey about online gamers discouraged me from relying on it for recruitment. I had invested time and resources in these two online surveys without any significant results. Instead I decided to follow an opportunistic approach and 'gather information from whatever sources are available' (Bryman, 2016: 415) and look for participants who are 'readily available and accessible to the researcher' (Abrams, 2010: 542). I decided to ask people I knew to identify research subjects (Becker, 1963: 45). Although there were no professional poker players among my friends or colleagues, I asked my personal contacts, involving an international network of researchers and friends, to identify any in their networks. This proved to be the most successful recruitment technique. The majority of the respondents were identified by this type of word of mouth approach (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Recruitment

recruitment	**number of respondents**
identified through personal contacts	21
identified by research participants (snowballing)	11
online recruitment	4
approached near a poker event	2
a player who had learned about my study approached me	1
TOTAL:	**39**

Source: Author

After gaining access to a few players, I was able to use snowballing that helped identify 11 further respondents. I observed a high degree of connectivity between the poker players in one country. However, I learned that initial access or a key contact person was needed to be able to access these networks. I was able to identify such networks in three countries: Bulgaria, Romania and Estonia. I travelled to Bulgaria in July 2013, Romania in November 2014 and to Estonia twice: in December 2012 and December 2013. While I travelled to Estonia and Bulgaria for other reasons and used this opportunity to identify local players, the trip to Romania was planned as a field trip following a hint I was given by a respondent in Bulgaria. This respondent gave me a valuable hint with regard to the popularity of professional online poker and staking in Romania. Following this, I spent three weeks travelling around Romania (Bucharest, Braşov, Constanţa, Cluj-Napoca) with the goal of identifying respondents. I was able to interview 17 people on this trip. In each of these cities, I focused on finding a key person who could introduce me to other players. When I could not find one through my own networks, I used local online communities and travelled to poker tournaments. When I first arrived in Romania, I identified on the Couchsurfing[8] website several local generic discussion groups for the biggest towns (or towns that were associated with gambling culture) in Romania. I asked the members of these online groups whether any of them could introduce me to professional players or were involved in professional poker playing themselves. This approach helped identify four respondents which was enough to get access to the wider community of professional players in Romania. In addition to this approach, I travelled to two poker events: Eureka Poker Tour (22-28 July 2013) in Golden Sands, Bulgaria and Pokerfest (3-9 November 2013) in Bucharest, Romania. I was invited to the event in Bucharest by one of the respondents who generously offered to introduce me to other players at the event. In addition to this, I approached two players outside the poker venue. At the festival in Golden Sands, a member of the organising team introduced me to one player who acted as a key

[8] Couchsurfing.com is a platform that is mainly associated with hospitality services that does not involve exchange of money. It is an example of sharing or gift economy. However, it is also used for social networking as it allows creating local discussion groups.

person and helped recruit additional participants. Overall, it seemed that 'getting introduced' by someone was the key for accessing these communities. This suggests that trust plays an important role among professional online poker players. However, there were limitations to this approach. Firstly, successful players were more likely to be suggested as possible respondents. It was also not always clear what criteria respondents used to identify other professional players as potential respondents. Secondly, female players appeared to be less connected to male-dominated local poker communities. This could lead to a sample biased towards male players. Only four of my interviewees were female (see Section 4.5.3 for more detailed analysis of demographics). I also experienced a high drop out rate. Some players who did agree to be interviewed did not arrive to the meeting as agreed, others cancelled last minute or did not respond to my messages. Overall 15 potential participants dropped out.

Overall I interviewed 39 people between December 2012 and May 2014. I conducted 33 one-to-one and three group interviews. The group interviews had two participants each. I sought to conduct one-to-one interviews as I was interested in participants' individual views but the three group interviews were suggested by the participants. In one case it was for reasons of convenience because I interviewed a married couple in their home. Both of them were involved in online poker. In the other two cases, the participants were friends and requested to be interviewed together. Although I was reluctant at first, I accepted because of the high drop out rate and my own time restrictions during the field trip. They did not resemble a focus group where a researcher examines 'the ways in which people in conjunction with one another interpret' certain themes but more of a group interview that is carried out 'with a number of individuals simultaneously' and out of convenience (Bryman, 2016: 501). With regard to the number of interviews, there is no straightforward answer to how many interviews should be conducted in a given study. This depends largely on research purpose, discipline and resources (Charmaz, 2014: 106). I stopped at 39 interviews for several reasons. Firstly, after interviewing 39 individuals, I had a solid selection of concepts that were filled with data. I also started seeing connections between various concepts – a conceptual framework began emerging

that I could connect to the existing literature. Secondly, the time period I had planned for data collection came to an end.

All the interviews took place (see Table 4.2) face to face except for four that I conducted over Skype because it was not practical to meet in person (Bryman, 2016: 492). This included one person who was in Mexico and others who were either in Malta, in a small town in the UK or in Estonia (he was not available to meet during my trip to Estonia). With regard to face-to-face interviews, I conducted them in Bulgaria, Romania, Estonia and the UK. As I was based in the UK and had therefore more flexibility, I interviewed the UK based people over a longer period of time, between December 2012 and April 2014. However, in the UK, I was not able to access any online poker communities but only individual players or experts.

Table 4.2: Geographical distribution of interview locations

geographical location of the interviews[9]	**number of interviews**
Estonia	7
Bulgaria	6
Romania	17
UK	5
Skype	4
TOTAL:	**39**

Source: Author

Of all the respondents, I interviewed four people in their homes for reasons of convenience or because of lack of alternatives. The majority of the face-to-face interviews took place in public spaces such as cafes, hotel lobbies, and university buildings or in casinos. Two of the group interviews were carried out in cafes, one in the participants' home. Although the drawback of some of these locations was the background noise and lack of privacy (Bryman, 2016: 471), I sometimes needed to act quickly and find a place that was nearby and easy to access in a given situation if I did not want to lose the opportunity to interview the person.

[9] With regard to the place they were conducted

This was particularly important during the recruitment at poker festivals. I had the impression that some players agreed more easily to be interviewed if there was no exchange of contact details and if the interview could take place immediately. Given the high drop out rate I experienced, the spontaneous 'being available' was sometimes more important then postponing the interview and trying to find a better location. Qualitative interviewing is often linked to researcher's ability to adapt and be flexible in many respects (Bryman, 2016: 483). However, the drawback of the recruitment at poker festivals was not only the background noise but also players' limited availability and their 'busy minds'. These players could only be interviewed in tournament breaks which were short (sometimes less than an hour), and their minds were busy with the ongoing tournament. I could sometimes feel their excitement and nervousness during the interview. However, given the valuable information these players shared with me, I would still do it the same way. I would perhaps liaise with the manager of the venue where these poker tournaments took place and organise a private meeting room to reduce the background noise. The next section describes the characteristics of the sample.

4.5.3 Characteristics of the sample

The majority (28) of the interviewees presented themselves as either professional or recreational online poker players (see Table 4.3). However, many of the respondents had multiple roles. Chapter 5 (see also Table 5.1) analyses the complexity of respondent's profiles in a three-stage model of their career trajectory. In general, the longer a person had been in contact with poker or active in the field, the more diverse was their profile. Although five of the respondents introduced themselves as owners, founders of or workers[10] in a poker-related business, most of them were also playing poker or had played it in the past. In contrast, some of the interviewees who presented themselves as professional players had also started a poker-related business. The lines between part and full-time, professional and recreational playing were fuzzy and various poker-related roles overlapping at times. In addition, some of the respondents talked about their

[10] I interviewed people as individuals and not representatives of a particular company

past and others about their present experiences with poker when I interviewed them. Table 4.3 is based on how respondents presented themselves or what they saw as their main role at the time of the interview (or in the past when their talk was focused on past experience).

Table 4.3: Respondents according to their main role

Type of respondent according to their main role at the time of the interview (as they presented themselves)	**number of respondents**	**country of residence**
poker player	28	Romania, Bulgaria, Estonia, Mexico, Malta, Croatia[11]
founder or owner of a poker-related business	3	Bulgaria, Romania
worker in a poker-related company	2	Malta, Bulgaria
gold farmer	3	UK, Romania
online trader	1	UK
EXPERTS		
former trade union representative of workers in the gambling industry	1	UK
managing director of a consulting company in the field of trading	1	UK
TOTAL:	**39**	

Source: Author

The two interviews with experts (see Table 4.3) provided some background information about working conditions in brick-and-mortar casinos in the UK and the trading industry. However, their contribution to the study was marginal. In addition to poker players, I interviewed three gold farmers (see also previous section) and one online trader. Although I discovered many similarities between online trading and professional online poker playing as a form of virtual work, I did not explore this avenue further. This was mainly because the interview with

[11] One interviewee had a status of a traveller. He had given up his home and was travelling to poker tournaments.

the online trader took place at the later stage of data collection when I had already formed the research questions and began analysing data.

In terms of the geographical distribution, participants were spread over eight countries. They were resident in Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania, UK, Mexico, Malta, Norway or Croatia and there were ten nationalities among them. The biggest number of respondents (17) was based in Romania. Although I interviewed seven people in Bulgaria, only three of them were actually based in Bulgaria because the rest had travelled to the international poker festival in Golden Sands where I recruited them. One participant had given up his country of residence partly because of poker and had the status of a traveller. Five of the participants had moved to another country primarily because of their work as professional players. For instance, a French player had moved to the UK because of discriminating tax laws towards professional online poker players in France. Although I found most of the respondents in European countries, I did not exclude participants from outside.

Out of all those who presented themselves as online poker players, 15 were in the age group 20-30 (with 11 of them being younger than 25) and 10 in the age group 31-40. Only two participants were older than 40. The participants were predominantly male. Out of 39 respondents only four respondents were female. Although this may be partly due to the limits of the snowballing technique as explained previously, it could also be country-specific. A female player in Romania had only met a few other female players during her career as a professional. However, an Estonian female respondent reported an active community of female players in Estonia. The majority (24) of the respondents (experts excluded) were either married or lived in a relationship. Seven participants out of 37 (experts excluded) had children. The low rate of families with children could be linked to the high number of participants under the age 25. With regard to education, many of the respondents (12) had graduated from or were studying at university (6). A proportionally high number (6) of participants had discontinued their university studies. According to these demographics, a typical online poker player is male, under 25, is studying at university, has no children but lives in a relationship. The

detailed information about demographics can also be found in Appendix C. The next section describes how the interviews were conducted.

4.5.4 Interview process

Grounded theory is compatible with a number of methods of data collection. I chose qualitative interviewing as a method of data collection not only because it is the most common tool of data collection in the grounded theory approach but because of its flexibility (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003: 111). It allows exploring how participants see the world and provide descriptive evidence of their experiences (Bryman, 2016). It was also the most obvious choice given the resources and time I had available. In contrast, ethnographic research involving participant observation is considered to be very time consuming (Bryman, 2016: 466). I combined open-ended and semi-structured in-depth interviewing techniques (Bryman, 2016).

The initial interviews were longer and more open-ended than later ones with very few structuring questions because there was no literature (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) about professional online poker players I could draw on when I began the research. Nevertheless the 'open-ended' approach evolved around their role as online poker players or gold farmers. The total interview time of 39 interviews amounted to 51 hours and 25 minutes. On average, an interview lasted for 79 minutes. The longest was 2 hours and 21 minutes and the shortest 23 minutes long. There were more two hour-long interviews when I first began conducting interviews. For instance, at the beginning, participants described the techniques of the game at length and explained the poker specific terms whereas when they did so in later interviews, I directed them towards other topics. As I gained more insider knowledge and began connecting data to existing concepts and literature, a broad structure emerged. Based on these initial findings, I designed a template for questions that I was interested in exploring further and that I used to guide the interviews. However, if the respondents took me in another direction and it was still in the broad context of work then I followed them. For instance, when I

discovered that a respondent was also playing online games for a living I directed the interview towards this topic.

In grounded theory, interview data is used to develop 'abstract conceptual categories' that may lead to the construction of a theory (Charmaz, 2014: 87). Thus the focus is on collecting data so that emerging abstract categories are plausible and saturated. When themes that emerged started making sense and responses became repetitive (Charmaz, 2014), I stopped asking 'follow-up questions' that generally 'stimulate further explanations' (Bryman, 2016: 473). This shortened the length of the interviews in the second half of data collection. However, I noticed that many of the respondents opened up after talking for at least one hour and began sharing more sensitive information such as problems and challenges they faced or information about illegal activities they or their friends were involved in. Bryman (2016: 484) also observed that interviewees tended to 'open up' at the end of the interview. According to Charmaz (2014: 105), it is the task of the researcher to build 'a context and pacing before asking difficult or possibly intrusive questions'. Thus even when repetitions occurred and some of the categories were already saturated, I let the respondents talk at least for one hour. I asked the more sensitive questions such as questions about their earnings or challenges they faced towards the end of the interview. When I presented the research project, I said that the interview typically lasts for about one hour but indicated that they could end it after an hour or talk longer if they wanted. Most of the respondents chose to go over the time (when there were no external constraints) and speak longer than an hour. There were no significant differences with regard to the interview process between face-to-face interviews and those conducted by Skype. My 'capacity to secure rapport' (Bryman, 2016: 492) was not affected in Skype interviews even though only one of the four interviews mediated by Internet was conducted as a video call.

All the interviews including the ones mediated by Internet were recorded with the consent of the respondents. While objectivist grounded theorists argue against recording, constructivist approach supports it as a way to capture the richness of data (Charmaz, 2014: 61-62). In this study, recording was essential for

a thorough analysis of the data. Note-taking as an alternative would have been too distracting and hindered the rapport with the interviewees (Bryman, 2016: 479). All the participants agreed to their interviews being recorded, with many of them stating proudly that they had nothing to hide.

In terms of my role in the interview process as a female researcher who had never played poker and a foreigner or expat, I made a couple of observations. I felt that being a female interviewer helped make the initial contacts in the highly male-dominated community. However, this was sometimes underpinned by sexual comments. For instance, one participant wrote a comment (after I had interviewed him) about my appearance in an online discussion group, with the intention to encourage other players to agree to an interview. At the beginning I felt pressured to gain insider knowledge (based on my previous experience with gold farmers). However, after the first few interviews with poker players, I observed that being an outsider was actually beneficial and made it easier to approach more sensitive topics. I was perceived as someone 'outside' the usual code of conduct players followed in these communities. After that I presented myself right at the beginning as an outsider to the game and to poker communities. Being a foreigner and a traveller (an outsider to the country) was also beneficial with regard to some of the sensitive topics especially with regard to unlawful activities. When respondents made hints that they had not declared their income or had been involved in other unlawful activities some of them reassured themselves by making 'well, you are not from here' type of statements. Nevertheless I reassured them by referring to the confidentiality agreement and research ethics that this research is bound to. Many authors have discussed the insider/ outsider dichotomy (or the space between) with regard to the researcher's position in the research (Al-Natour, 2011, Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, Muhammad et al., 2015). It is often believed that being an insider helps access certain forms of knowledge that outsiders find difficult to access (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009, Muhammad et al., 2015). However, in online poker communities, my outsider status seemed to give me a better access to players' experiences that they considered as sensitive or negative. It is also possible that the participants who were predominantly male felt more comfortable sharing these issues with a

woman than they would have been with a male interviewer as some researchers have observed (Williams and Heikes, 1993). The next section looks at the ethical issues that arose in relation to this study.

4.5.5 Research ethics

This study was conducted in accordance with the University of Hertfordshire ethical protocol for research involving the use of human subjects (UH, 2016) and the code of practice for research (UKRIO, 2009) by the UK Research Integrity Office that the University of Hertfordshire is a full member of. The main objective of these ethical principles is to ensure that no harm is caused to human subjects. I followed the principles by seeking informed consent and applying measures to ensure participants' anonymity and confidentiality.

Prior to any interviews, all participants were fully informed of the purpose of the study and their consent was gained. In the first instance, I gave each potential respondent details of the study verbally. This included describing their rights to anonymity, right to withdraw at any time and explaining the need for their consent. I also expressed the wish to audio record the interview and explained that an interview typically lasts one hour but it could be longer if they chose to speak longer. This verbal explanation was supported by an informed consent form in English or Romanian (see Annex D and E) that I gave to each participant. The informed consent letter included a description of the study. After giving people some 'thinking time' (Dench et al., 2004), and after they had verbally agreed to be interviewed, I asked participants to sign the consent form. Those who were interviewed by Skype received a copy of the informed consent form by email in advance. I asked for their consent verbally which I recorded at the beginning of the interview. All interviews were recorded after receiving written or verbal consent from participants. I handed out my contact details prior to the interview. However, whenever it was possible (when participants had shared their contact details with me), I also made sure everyone had my contact details electronically by sending them a message after the interview and thanking for their participation. This was in case they decided to withdraw from the study.

According to the ethics principles, two potential sources of harm were identified in relation to the study: invasion of privacy by questions that participants may perceive intrusive and the stress caused by this (Bryman, 2016: 131), and disclosure of participants' identity. Given the study's exploratory character, there were no fixed questions but only themes and areas that I wanted to explore. However, in order to avoid potentially stressful situations, I explained to participants that they were free to refuse answers and offered that I could pause the recorder at any time if they needed a break. The issue of privacy is closely linked to maintaining participants' anonymity and confidentiality (Bryman, 2016: 132). Anonymity refers to steps that ensure that respondent cannot be identified and confidentiality means that access to respondents' details is limited (Dench et al., 2004: 71). In order to protect participants' anonymity and avoid any harm that could be caused by revealing their identity, I replaced all real names by pseudonyms and made sure that I did not use any other information that could reveal their identity. In order to protect access to respondents' information and details, all the audio recordings and any other information were saved on a password protected computer. The backup disks were also protected by password. I digitised all the signed consent forms, separated them from any other information and kept a copy of them on the computer that was protected by password. When an interview was transcribed by another person, I removed all the information that could have revealed participants' identity prior to sharing any files with the transcriber. I also asked the transcribers to sign a confidentiality agreement (see Annex G). The study was assessed and approved by the University of Hertfordshire ethics committee.

4.5.6 Data analysis

Data analysis in grounded theory is a process that begins soon after the collection of initial data and involves coding data in several phases moving from 'generating codes that stay close to the data to more selective and theoretically elaborate ways of conceptualising the phenomenon of interest' (Bryman, 2016: 575). For data analysis, I adopted the constructivist grounded theory approach that

distinguishes between three stages of coding: initial, focused and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding requires a detailed analysis of transcribed data, focused coding analyses a selection of codes that make analytically most sense, and theoretical coding is concerned with finding relationships between the selected codes and linking the emerging concepts to existing literature (Charmaz, 2014).

In the first step, I transcribed all the interviews using F5 transcription software for Mac OS X and a foot pedal to accelerate the process. I chose this software because it allowed creating time stamps and was easily accessible. Time stamping was a useful feature when I needed to find and re-listen to a passage, especially in those interviews that were transcribed by other people. A small number of interviews were transcribed externally. However, I carefully re-listened to all of them and made corrections. I used verbatim transcription technique and included all grammatical errors, pauses, laughter, moments of hesitation. When the recording was not clear I marked it with 'inc' and re-listened to it later again. As I was 'immersed' in data during the transcription process, first patterns and concepts began emerging in my mind. In the next step, I imported all the data in qualitative data analysis software NVivo for Mac, version 10.2.0 and 11.2.2. NVivo is a tool that helps manage large data sets but it does not help with decisions on how to code or interpret data (Bryman, 2016: 617).

The coding was undertaken in two phases: initial large scale coding and focused and theoretical coding in one. In the first phase of coding, I coded every line of the transcripts in NVivo, often in more than one category. Given the large set of data, it was a tedious and time-consuming process. Although I entered the process with an open mind, I did not try to empty my mind (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) but was influenced by concepts from sociology of work. A large set of nodes[12] or themes emerged as a result of the initial coding. In the second phase, I focused on the

[12] Node is a term used in NVivo. According to the NVivo Help, it refers to 'a collection of references about a specific theme, place, person or other area of interest.' References are gathered by 'coding' sources such as interviews, focus groups, articles or survey results'. NVivo. (2017) *NVivo 10 for Mac. NVivo Help* [Online]. Available at: http://help-nv10mac.qsrinternational.com/desktop/concepts/about_nodes.htm [Accessed: 15 August 2017].

largest groups of nodes or categories that had emerged and disregarded others (see Table 4.4 for an overview of the largest groups of nodes). I re-read the transcripts, expanded the number of sub-folders (that I began creating during the initial coding) and made linkages to existing literature and most notably to the literature that relates to work and employment. This process was only partly done in NVivo. In the last and the most analytical phase of coding I used print-outs of nodes created in NVivo and colouring pens to take notes, mark the contours of emerging concepts and quotes that I intended to use for illustration. The use of NVivo helped manage a large set of data and save time (Bryman, 2016: 603). However, its contribution to theoretical coding or finding relationships between concepts and linking them to the literature was limited.

Table 4.4: Largest groups of nodes that emerged after initial coding

nodes	**number of child nodes after focused coding in NVivo**
attitudes	9
entrepreneurship	9
entry to poker	7
health and body	3
lifestyle	12
motivation to play poker	40
occupational identity	2
personality	28
risks associated with poker	46
skills needed for poker	37
poker as a job – pros and cons	0
staking	56
future plans and dreams	0
switching between different modes of poker (full time, part time etc.)	6
training	4
work processes	31

Source: Author

Although Charmaz (2014) presents coding as a process in three distinct phases, there was a constant interaction between data collection, coding and looking for linkages to the literature. Themes already started emerging in my head when I conducted the interviews. The first findings helped shape the interview schedule

and formulate the research questions. Research questions were formulated in the middle of the process that combined interviewing, transcribing, reflecting about the data and reading relevant literature. This reflects the iterative process of data collection and analysis typical to the grounded theory approach (Bryman, 2016: 381).

4.5.7 Language

There were ten different languages that participants spoke as native language (see Table 4.5). Romanian formed the biggest group with 16 participants speaking it as a first language. This was followed by interviewees who spoke Estonian (9) and English (5) as their first language. Despite this range of first languages, interviews were conducted in only two languages according to my language skills. I conducted seven interviews (with 9 participants because they were part of a group interview) in Estonian and 30 in English. As a result, 14 respondents could speak to me in their native language and 25 in their second language. I also offered to the German-speaking participant to conduct the interview in German and to the French-speaking interviewee that we could speak in French. However, both of them chose to speak in English as this was the language they used in their daily life and felt more comfortable talking about their work as professional players.

Table 4.5: Participants according to their first language

the first (native) language of the respondents	**number of respondents**
Chinese	1
Estonian	9
Bulgarian	3
English	5
Norwegian	1
Croatian	1
German	1

French	1
Romanian	16
Czech	1
TOTAL	**39**

Source: Author

I used an interpreter for interviews with two respondents whose native language was Romanian. However, both of them had a passive knowledge of English and understood most of the questions. In one case the respondent even felt confident enough to respond in English. The interpreter only helped translate occasional words during the interview. I asked the interpreter to sign a confidentiality agreement (see Annex F) prior to the interview and briefed her about the purpose of the study (Tribe and Keefe, 2009). The use of interpreter is not without problems especially if there is a power relationship between the interpreter and the respondent (Tribe and Keefe, 2009) or the interpreter takes an active role in the research process (Pitchforth and Teijlingen, 2005). The interpreter used in this study was the former university lecturer of the respondents. She also acted as a gatekeeper by recruiting both participants. Although there was no teacher-student relationship at the time of the interview, some of the former dynamics between the interpreter and the respondent may have influenced participants' openness to discuss certain topics. For instance, in one case the respondent talked about his addiction and stealing money from his parents which are potentially sensitive topic to discuss in front of the former teacher. However, given that he discussed them as his past experience that he had overcome he could distance himself from these experiences. The overall experience showed that these interviews could have been conducted without the help of an interpreter. If I was in a similar situation again, I would test participants' language skills in an informal talk before deciding to use the help of an interpreter. In general, participants' level of English was good. However, some of the expressions in quotes I use in this study are grammatically not correct. Where the meaning was affected I added an explanation in square brackets.

With regard to the interviews conducted in Estonian, I decided to transcribe them in the original language and not to translate them into English. This was mainly for practical reasons. I am not a trained translator and did not have the resources to hire one. The transcriptions in Estonian and English were both imported to NVivo. I analysed them together despite being in different languages. Given that I am fluent in both languages and was the only person accessing the data and doing the analysis there was no disadvantage of the approach to the study. The only minor drawback was that I could not use the search function in NVivo that looks for word frequency.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has described in detail how the study was conducted and why it was done this way and not differently (Silverman, 2005). Firstly, it has shown how the unknown and 'hidden' character of professional poker informed the choice of methods, tools and techniques. This study adopted an exploratory approach as an overall principle and made use of constructivist grounded theory to complement it, especially because of its tools with regard to data collection and analysis that help explore unstudied social phenomena. I have explained why I decided to use qualitative interviewing technique and how I used open-ended and semi-structured in-depth interviews to gather rich data about the life of professional poker players. In order to give the study more credibility I have described the interpretive paradigm in which the choice of these methods and strategy place it. Although it is believed that theoretical underpinnings can contribute to greater acceptance of findings, placing research in one paradigm is charged with problems of which I listed a few. In addition to these, I have described my active role as an 'interpretive bricoleur' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011a: 4) in the research process, and the journey I made from confirmatory to exploratory research. Despite adopting the grounded theory approach that is often presented as a strategy that helps develop a theory grounded in data, this study aims to develop an empirically informed conceptual framework and not a theory. I chose this outcome because of the criticism that the theory building in grounded theory has

received and my focus on the unknown and unexplored in this study. According to Stebbins (2001), when a topic is unexplored then new concepts have a priority over theory building (that can be done in the next instance).

Secondly, this chapter has described the journey from studying gold farmers to exploring the life of professional online poker players, how I gained access to this hidden community, the interview process, what I did to ensure that no harm is caused to research participants, the rich data I gained in qualitative interviews and how I analysed it. I have described my decision-making processes, the challenges I faced and how they affected the course of the study. In this research process, I learned that a study of a hidden population requires a high degree of flexibility, spontaneity and the ability to accept that things do not always go as planned. For these reasons the choice of exploratory and the grounded theory approach provided an optimal framework and support to study the unknown world of professional online poker players. The research process also revealed opportunities and important gaps for future research both thematically and methodologically. The next four chapters discuss the concepts that emerged as a result of the data gathering and analysis that I described here.

Chapter 5: The process of becoming a professional online poker player

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the process of becoming a professional online poker player. I explore how the journey evolves from the first encounter with the game to the decision to become a professional player. In this context, I present a three-stage model of the trajectory. Firstly, I study how the respondents discovered the game, how they became aware of what skills, investments and sacrifices were needed for becoming a professional, what motivated them and any difficulties they faced. Secondly, I describe how and why they took the decision to graduate from recreational into professional playing and how they experienced their first period as a professional. This chapter provides a basis for discussing the construction of the professional self that I focus on in Chapter 6.

5.2 Two stage entry into professional poker

My interview data revealed that the trajectory of a professional online poker player consists of three stages: an exploratory, a professional and a post-professional stage, also referred to here as stages I, II and III respectively. A journey into professional poker typically begins with an exploratory phase. This is a phase of first encounters with the game. In this phase, a player plays poker for 'fun' and learns the basic rules of the game. The stage II or professional poker stage describes a phase where poker becomes work. At this stage, players typically make a conscious decision to regard online poker as their job even though their core activity (playing poker) is still the same as when they played it for fun. This change in attitude or reinterpretation of the situation is often accompanied by giving up their other work (if they were working previously), restructuring their days, investing time in training and skills development and introducing a range of self-management practices. The third stage describes post-

professional activities, which often involve starting a business (either poker related or not) or working for a company (often poker-related) as an employee. All these three stages have their own characteristics which I explore in this study. The focus of this chapter is on the process of becoming a professional online poker player and thus on the exploratory and professional phase. The post-professional poker phase will be the subject of Chapter 8.

According to this three-stage model, the majority of my respondents would be classified as stage II players. Of the 32 poker players (as opposed to experts) I interviewed, 18 respondents were in stage II, six in stage I and eight in stage III at the time of the interview or had reached this stage before they quit poker. From those who had entered the post-professional poker phase, five interviewees had previously been playing poker full-time and three part-time. Together with those players, I talked in total to 26 players who could inform me about the professional poker phase and their entry route. And because every professional player had begun their career by exploring the game first, everyone could inform me about the exploratory phase. Table 5.1 (please see Appendix A for more detailed information) shows the number of players according to the poker phase they were in at the time of the interview.

Table 5.1: Respondents according to poker stages they were in at the time of the interview

	Activity at the time of the interview	**Number of players**
Stage I (exploratory stage)	exploring the game	5 (1 was transitioning to stage II)
	had quit poker in the exploratory phase	1
	Total: 6	
Stage II (professional stage)	full-time professional player	13 (1 was transitioning to opening a poker-related business, 1 tried to enter stage III but had given up)
	part-time professional player	4
	had quit poker in stage II	1
	Total: 18	

Stage III (post-professional stage)	employee in a poker-related company	2 (one was part-time and the other full-time professional player before)
	opened a poker-related company	4 (3 of those players were full-time and 1 part-time professional before entering this stage)
	opened a not poker-related company	2 (one was part-time and the other full-time professional player before)
	Total: 8	
Total number of poker players interviewed: 32		

Source: Author

In terms of demographics, of all the respondents that this chapter draws on, three are female and the rest male (see Section 4.5.3). Of those female players two were playing poker professionally and one had transitioned to stage III, working as an employee for a poker-related company. The average age of players in stage I and stage II was similar – 28 years old – whereas the average age of players in the post-professional phase was slightly higher – 33 years (see Table 5.2 for more detailed information).

Table 5.2: Respondents' age according to different poker stages

	Number of players	**Average age**	**Youngest**	**Oldest**
Stage I	6	28.50	22	42
Stage II	18	28.71[13]	20	41
Stage III	8	33.43	28	40

Source: Author

[13] Those who played in the past but had graduated to stage III were excluded from the calculation of stage II but included in the calculation of stage III. Two respondents could not be included in the stage II calculation because they did not tell their age. One respondent was 25 years old at the time of the interview but only played poker when he was 22/23 years old. He quit at the age of 23. The age 23 was considered in the calculation.

The time spent in each phase varies and not all the players I interviewed had the intention to transition to the next stage at the time of the interview. Furthermore, because of entry barriers such as skills and access to finances, not everyone who wanted to transition to the next phase had succeeded. The data also revealed that the entry points into stage I and II can typically be narrowed down to one event or incident, whereas the transition from stage II to stage III is more fluid. When a player transitioned to the post-professional phase, which in some cases meant starting a business or entering an employment relationship, poker continued to play a role in their life either as a leisure or part-time professional activity.

Another particularity was the fluid use of the term 'poker' by the respondents, which varyingly can denote both online and offline poker played in a casino. This suggests that there is a close tie between these two. For instance, it is possible to qualify through online poker to play at an offline tournament which some of my respondents did regularly. Data revealed a frequent switch between offline and online poker which also explains the fluid use of the term 'poker'. This ambiguity is also reflected in parts of my writing. It was not always possible to separate the meanings of the terms 'poker', 'offline poker' and 'online poker'. However, in the majority of my writing the term 'poker' refers to 'online poker'. In order to reduce repetitions, I use the terms 'amateur', 'casual' and 'recreational' player interchangeably.

In the following sections, I explore the first two stages of the three-stage model by looking at their characteristics, duration, entry routes, and what motivates someone to enter those different poker phases.

5.3 Exploratory phase (stage I)

Before players become 'professionals', they go through an initial 'warm-up phase'. In this phase, they typically learn the game with all its explicit and implicit rules and familiarise themselves with the lifestyle. In addition to the six recreational players, all 26 respondents who were playing or had played poker for a living had

gone through an exploratory phase. In the following sections, I investigate the characteristics, duration and entry routes typical of this phase.

5.4 Discovering online poker

There were three different ways players discover online poker and enter the exploratory phase: through another person, accidentally through media or by actively looking for it on their own. The majority of my respondents were introduced to online poker either by a friend, family member, partner or a work colleague who taught them the basic rules and in some cases helped them to get the right tools (for instance software tools). I observed that all three female players I interviewed were introduced to the game either by their partner or a member of the family. Katariina from Estonia who was actively involved in the Estonian poker community and was a professional player herself had also observed that the majority of her female friends had found their way to poker through their partner or a family member (often through their male sibling). Many of those who had entered poker through another person reported that they were introduced to the game accidentally, without any previous interest. Some of them were even sceptical about the game but 'settled' after familiarising themselves with it, as Udo, who discovered online poker through a friend described:

Translated from Estonian: *[...] initially I had a negative opinion about gambling. I have a natural sciences background and I thought that casino and gambling are not for me because I thought that the element of chance is dominating there and that you cannot control it [poker] and that it is just gambling. I thought that only weirdos and gamblers do it. [...] But then I understood that in this game [poker] you play against other players and that you can influence the likelihood of winning. If you play against a casino then it is clear that you lose. In the long run, you cannot win against a casino but in poker the element of chance diminishes in the long run.*

[...] And then in the summer, I started learning it.[14] *(Udo, 31, Estonia)*

The second most common way to discover online poker was through print or other media such as TV advertisements, watching poker on TV, newspaper articles, or reading a book about it. Max from Switzerland described his experience:

[...] and the next one I picked was a poker book. I was like okay, that looks interesting. Since everybody has been talking about it, there was a poker strategy book in the bathroom and it gave you like the basic statistics and the things to look for. And I read this and studied it a bit and then I said okay, that's interesting. So this got me started to playing online. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

Alex, a 33-year-old former player of online games, described the media-related incident that marked his entry to poker:

And then I see the commercial and then I have no job [...]. That's why I started. (Alex, 33, Romania)

While respondents who had never played poker needed an external incident or an introduction by another player to get started, many of the former offline poker players started on their own initiative. For instance, for Morten, a 37-year-old player from Norway, it was a revelation when he discovered that he could play poker online. Shortly after that, he made the decision to move to Malta and become a professional online poker player:

[14] Original text: [...] mul algul oli sellest suhteliselt sihuke negatiivne suhtumine hasartmängudesse, et, et mul on reaalteaduslik taust ja siis ma arvasin, et kasiino ja need õnnemängud ei ole nad minu jaoks sellepärast, et (…) et ma tundsin, et seal on nii palju seda õnnefaktorit, et sa ei saa seda kontrollida ja, ja et see on sihuke GAMBLING, et, et seda teevad ainult mingid kas põrunud või hasartmängurid [...] Aga siis see (..) siis sain selgeks, sain aru, et selles mängus sa tegelikult mängid teiste mängijate vastu. Sa saad ise nüüd nii palju (inc.) neid nagu tõenäosusi siis nagu muuta, et kui sa mängid kasiino vastas, et siis on nagu ilmselge, et sa kaotad raha, et, et see on nagu, et sa ei saa võita pikas perspektiivis aga pokkeris on ju see, et pikas perspektiivis see õnn kuidagi hakkab vähenema [...] Ja siis ma hakkasin suvel õppima seda mängu.

I always played lots of poker: travelling to casinos and playing. [After discovering that he could play it online] I can play that at home! And I was like: I can win at this! So and then we moved. We were three friends from Norway. We all moved to Malta [...]. Because of the tax rules. So we stayed there [...]. We moved there and played. (Morten, 37, Norway)

These former offline poker players frequently switched between offline and online poker considering the former as a 'fun activity' and the latter both fun and work. The frequent switches were also reflected in their generic use of the term 'poker'.

5.4.1 'Emotional rollercoaster' - characteristics of the exploratory phase

The route into professional poker is a process, often an emotional and adventurous one. The players I interviewed described their first encounter with poker almost unanimously as 'fun' or 'pleasure' rather than as 'playing seriously', 'playing for money', 'as an option to make money' or 'playing professionally' – phrases with which they described the professional poker phase. Some players also described it as a hobby or an activity they engaged in for social reasons. In all these cases the initial encounter with poker was considered entertainment and not work. A 33-year-old player from Romania whose intention was to become a professional player described his journey:

It started as a hobby and...I do not mind earning my living with poker but it's hard and I also have family. I have two kids, and the schedule does not always...My family is my priority [...]. (Horia, 33, Romania)

Many players described the exploratory phase as an 'emotional rollercoaster' marked by losses and surprising wins. Typically these wins or losses created a strong emotional response. Surprising wins served as an engine and motivated players to continue exploring the game as Max from Switzerland described:

Then somehow I win a sit and go. I played a 180 minutes sit and go and I won this for I think it was like $200, something like this - $180. I'm not quite sure how much it was. But I just remember that it felt like the greatest victory ever, because like, I won this much money in a short amount of time, and I was like, wow! This is amazing, I wanna keep doing this. And this really, really got me started cause I was like... okay...this is simple. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

In contrast, losses may result in 'poker tilt' – depression caused by financial losses in poker – as Udo from Estonia experienced:

Translation from Estonian*: And then I started to have bad results during one month. I was winning before but then I started losing. And then I started to have something that certainly all poker players experience in their life. Everything seemed hopeless so that I was thinking whether I should switch back to a real job again*[15]*. (Udo, 31, Estonia)*

Poker tilt is not specific to the exploratory phase, however, inexperienced players were more likely to struggle with it. For some of the players, overcoming poker tilt played an important role in the decision to become a professional player. The experience taught them how to control their emotions – an important skill, as many of the respondents described, and which I will have a closer look at in Chapter 6. In the next section, I explore additional factors that played a role in the decision to graduate into professional poker.

5.4.2 'I had to learn everything' - becoming aware of the journey

For many of the respondents, playing poker professionally only appeared as a possibility after they had learned the basic rules of the game and had at least one moment of 'high' which typically meant winning real money (as opposed to play money). Many of them reported that in the beginning they 'were really bad', 'did

[15] Original text: Ja siis tuli esimene sihuke nagu mõõna periood, et kus ma tundsin, et mul on kuu aega nagu täiesti nagu kuidagi mäng laguneb, et kogu aeg oled ennem võitnud ja siis hakkad kaotama ja siis tuli selline asi peale mida kõik pokkeri mängijad kindlasti elus kogevad, et tundub kõik nii mõttetu, et pigem nagu vaataks jälle nagu reaalse töö poole tagasi.

not understand anything of the game' or did not have any prior knowledge of the game. After learning the rules of the game, they discovered that in order to win on a regular basis they needed to learn to be emotionally strong, get to know various strategies and tools, read about psychology of the game and probabilities, learn how to manage their finances and discipline themselves. This is when the decision to become a professional player began evolving. Many of the players reported that learning about the importance of training in poker and finding out how to access relevant knowledge was an important milestone in their decision to become a professional player. They also emphasised having recognised the importance of self-learning, continuous learning and self-discipline.

Most of the respondents started training themselves either with the help of a more experienced player, by reading books or watching training videos. Some of them increased the number of games because they believed in learning through experience. For instance, Suzana, a female player from Croatia, learned the basic rules from her ex-partner. She described her first encounter with poker as an important time for training: 'first it was just how to learn how to play'. All the female respondents learned the basic poker rules from the person who had introduced them to the game. In contrast, Stojan, a 40-year-old male player from Bulgaria trained himself with the help of books when he first started:

I remember the first session. I won like 40 dollars which was wow! And then only in a couple of months, I started reading books because I am this type of person, you know, academic. I bought books. (Stojan, 40, Bulgaria)

Margus, a 25-year-old player from Estonia relied on the help of more experienced players who taught him the game:

Translated from Estonian: *I think that the first few months were the most difficult time when playing on the Internet...I did not have any previous knowledge, no skills at all. I had to learn everything on my own. But then I met a few compatriots who were more experienced [...]. Back then it was more difficult to find any information*

but I was lucky to meet these people whom I am still in contact with. They taught me the game. It took me only a few months [to learn the game] [16] *(Margus, 25, Estonia)*

At the beginning of the exploratory phase, some of the players played for play money and avoided investing their 'real money'. They considered it as a 'safe option' when they were still learning the basic rules, as Sorin from Romania explained:

Not every time I play on real money online. I make…I play with virtual money [...]. It's easier to spend money for free than your money, your real money. It's easier like that and like this and (..) when I want to make profit I play with real money. (Sorin, 20, Romania)

Whether someone played for play money and learned to play poker with the help of another player, by reading books, through experience or by combining all those three depended on their personal preference and on the access to and availability of information and resources. However, they had all learned that knowing the basic rules of the game is not enough and that the trajectory into professional poker is a process that requires sacrifices, discipline and personal investments.

5.4.3 Duration of the exploratory poker phase

The time players spent on learning and exploring poker before becoming a professional player varied. Data revealed that it mostly depended on players' other activities in life and on how successful they were in this initial phase. Those who were in full-time employment, had another source of secured income or enjoyed family support hesitated longer before they switched to professional poker. These players explored the game for a few years before they ventured the

[16] Original text: Ma arvan, et esimesed paar kuud olid kôige raskemad internetis mängides sellepärast, et mul noh...seal mingisuguste teadmiste pagasit ei olnud, mingisuguseid oskuseid ei olnud ja kôik mis ma ôppisin pidin omal käel tegema. Ja ma ei teagi...sealt edasi ma sain nagu mônede eestlastega tuttavaks, kes asjaga olid juba tegelenud veidi pikemalt. [...] Siis jah, et ennem oligi oli väga raske ennem kuskilt mingit infot saada ja ma ônneks leidsin paar inimest, kellega ma tänapäevani veel räägin, kes ôpetasid mulle ja siis oligi paari kuuga.

switch. For instance, Katariina, a 39-year-old female player from Estonia and a mother of three children, started playing during her paid maternity leave and waited until the end of her leave (when her child was three years old) before she gave up her job as a prosecutor and decided to become a professional poker player. Or Paul, a 31-year-old player from France, explored the game in his free time for four years before he decided to give up his full-time job in creative industries. Another player, Roman, a 41-year-old man from Czech Republic, played poker 'almost every night' for two to three years before he gave up his full-time job as a sports trainer. Players with a secured income explored poker alongside their other activities longer than those who did not have a secured income or were at a turning point in their life (for instance recent graduates). The latter group took the decision to become a professional player faster. In some cases, it only took a month or two before they moved on to stage II. For instance, Sorin, a 20-year-old student from Romania only played 'for pleasure the first month' before he 'started to play for money' which in his case referred to the professional poker phase. Peeter, a 24-year-old player from Estonia who was unemployed after finishing his military service, spent one month exploring the game before he decided to embark on a poker career. The group of players with no secure income consisted of students, recent graduates, unemployed, people on career breaks, on sick or maternity leave.

Also those who decided to embark on a part-time poker career moved faster out of the exploratory phase. For instance, Suzana, a 34-year-old female player from Croatia who was working full-time in a bank did not intend to give up her job and started working as a part-time professional 'very soon' (without specifying the exact period of time) after she first discovered poker. At the same time those who had a secure income or were studying were also more likely to embark on a part-time poker career. There were 14 professional players among my respondents who played or had played poker part-time. Six of them were studying and eight were either employed or self-employed in another profession.

Another important determinant of the time spent in the exploratory phase was the initial success. The number of wins and the amount of money a player won in

the exploratory phase had an impact on the decision to become a professional player. Stojan, a player from Bulgaria described that, despite not knowing anything about the game, he was successful and won real money from the beginning. Shortly after this experience, he made the decision to give up his full-time employment and became a professional player. Max, a 29-year-old player from Switzerland was also successful from early on and decided quickly that he wanted to do it professionally although he was also a recent graduate which may have facilitated his decision:

I realised, wow, this is so easy to make money here, why wouldn't I just do this full time. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

The importance of initial success in becoming a professional poker player may also explain why some players interrupted the exploratory phase several times. Not winning or not winning enough money can be discouraging especially at the beginning. Boris, a 25-year-old player from Romania described his interrupted journey into professional poker:

I won like again 500 dollars on a tournament and basically since then I was on and off like stopped playing for a while. [...] and then [...] I started playing again and there was one big win in my life. I won 4,000 dollars at a tournament [...]. Online tournament and then, then was the first time then I decided that I want to live out of this. (Boris, 25, Romania)

A few more players described their route into professional poker as an 'on and off' journey, in particular with reference to the initial exploratory phase. In addition to the initial success and favourable life circumstances, effort and time was needed in the process of becoming a professional. The next section explores the aspect of time.

5.4.4 'I had this free time, spare time to get interested in gambling'

Data revealed that 'having spare time' was an important precondition in the route into professional poker. I discovered four different types of players in this regard: 1) The bored employee with lots of spare time at work; 2) The unemployed person with nothing else to do; 3) The free time player (someone who dedicated their free time to poker); 4) The online gamer who was looking for a new challenge. These categories tell a story about how and why someone gets interested in becoming a professional online poker player.

The bored employee with spare time typically had lots of time during working hours, either due to the nature of his or her job (for instance, in a job that involves waiting for customers) and feeling 'bored' or not challenged and consequently neglecting work-related tasks. They used their paid working time to play poker. Stojan from Bulgaria who started playing poker during his working hours because he had automated all the tasks is a good example:

I had been working already for 2-3 years. And everything was automated. [...] and this is the reason why I started because I had all the systems which I was responsible for. Everything was automated and only when something broke down, I had to come to fix it. You know. So I had like 6 hours per day free in front of the computer. What do you do? You read and then you start gambling, you know like sooner or later you come to it. And when you have this inside you, you know…which is a long story with my gambling. (Stojan, 40, Bulgaria)

Those who described their work as not challenging or 'boring' created time for poker by neglecting their work related tasks. Lennard from Estonia and Stanko from Bulgaria both described how they started playing during their working hours:

Translation from Estonian: *Sometimes I got bored. I was horribly bored and I did not like it. But when I get very bored I've got Pokerstars [poker software] on my work computer. So that even if I get [bored] I can play*[17]*. (Lennard, 22, Estonia)*

I used to work in a web hostel – a web hosting company. Really boring job to be honest but that was where I actually got into [playing poker]. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

The unemployed with nothing else to do lived either from their savings or received social benefits and had an oversupply of free time. As already discussed previously, players on career break or maternity leave or unemployed were faster to enter professional poker.

The free time player was someone who pursued a full-time activity but dedicated his or her free time to poker. They were either self-employed, employed, studying or had other commitments (e.g. a family to take care of). They received a salary or had another arrangement that ensured that their basic needs were taken care of (e.g. some of them lived with parents). They did not have much time compared to the previous two categories of players but they spent most of their free time and some of their sleeping time on exploring poker. For instance, Horia, a 33-year-old player from Romania who worked full-time and had two children balanced his free time between poker and his family:

If I have some spare time I'm playing poker. Sometimes I'm trying to balance (...) both, family and poker. So this is how I started poker. (Horia, 33, Romania)

Roman, a 41-year-old player from Romania worked as a full-time sports trainer during the day and played 'almost every night'. Mihai from Romania worked as a university lecturer in the United States and did not have many friends. To escape social isolation he started playing poker in his free time. Some of my respondents

[17] Original text: Igav hakkab lihtsalt vahepeal. Meeletult, meeletult igav. Ja ma ei seedi seda. Ja noh, kui mul hakkab seal väga igav siis mul on ônneks tööle tômmatud ka PokerStars (giggle). Niimoodi (giggle), et isegi kui mul..siis ma ei pea seal vähemalt kuradima kogu aeg tühja passima. Saan vahepeal (inc.) mängida.

were students or pupils living with their parents when they first started exploring online poker. Many of the 'free time players' reported problems they were trying to escape such as social isolation or burnout. This may explain why they chose to spend most of their free time and also parts of their sleeping time on playing poker.

The online gamer looking for a new challenge was a player who earned money at online games but was looking for a new activity. For many of them, online poker appeared as an easy 'career option' because some of the skills acquired in online games are transferrable to poker (I will explore this topic in Chapter 6). For instance, Alex, a 33-year-old respondent from Romania felt that he was wasting his time at online games and was looking for a change:

When I start get older (giggle) from…I don't know 25, 26, I started to look my way to something more profitable, not just playing and wasting time. I found poker and now I am kind of recuperate the time lost. (Alex, 33, Romania)

The ex-online gamers also went through an exploratory phase. However, some of them started exploring the option of making a living out of poker more systematically than others and even before they began playing it. Their 'fun' period was more channelled and they played at the expense of their time spent on online games.

These four categories suggest that the availability of time is an important factor in the journey into professional poker. It is gained through neglect of other commitments or activities and relies on existing financial support.

5.5 Becoming a professional poker player (stage II)

After the 'warm-up phase', some players decided to graduate to stage II. This section explores the transition into and characteristics of professional playing

based on descriptions of those players (26 in total) who had reached or passed the stage II at the time of the interview.

5.5.1 A self-proclaimed professional

I observed that the transition from the exploratory to the professional poker phase was decision-based. Most of the self-proclaimed professionals took the decision after having familiarised themselves with the game over a period of time. This was accompanied by a change in attitude towards the game, re-definition of the situation and sometimes by giving up another work activity. For instance, Stojan from Bulgaria described his decision to become a professional player:

And then I decided that I am gonna be online poker player. I am gonna live all my life playing poker because this was my passion really. It is my passion. (Stojan, 40, Bulgaria)

As I will show in the next section, not everyone who intends to make a living out of poker succeeds. This could explain why a change in attitude or re-definition of the situation marked the start of the professional poker phase rather than financial success, as Max from Switzerland explained:

Once you're not just like playing to play because you like the game but you actually start seeing this as an option to make money, you change the attitude to the whole game, and it becomes like a job almost. I mean it becomes a job that you don't mind doing. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

For some of the players, and especially for those who were in full-time employment or self-employed, the decision to become a professional player was followed by giving up their job in order to have more time they could dedicate to playing. Many of them reported that they were not happy with their work, did not feel challenged, had a burn out, did not find their job interesting anymore or felt that it was too stressful. All these reasons made them want to change their situation and do something different. For instance, Stojan from Bulgaria was

employed as an IT specialist in a private company and exhausted. He decided to quit and become a full time player:

So I was very well paid but nevertheless I was fed up with this [working as a computer scientist, programmer in a startup company] so I stopped doing it. (Stojan, 40, Bulgaria)

Among those who gave up their other activity (or activities) were a sports trainer, restaurant manager, web designer, concierge, owner of an Internet cafe and a professional online gamer. For them, professional poker started when they decided to give up their job. For instance, Paul from France was a professional online gamer and worked as a dance teacher. His professional poker career started when he decided to give up both of these activities and cover his living expenses from poker winnings:

[...] I was focusing on poker only and I became a pro like pro doesn't mean anything but just it was my only income. Poker was my only income. (Paul, 31, France)

For many of the leavers, poker became a full-time activity and their only source of income:

[...] I started playing and then I quit my job [...], played full time. (Morten, 37, Norway)

The self-defined status was even more visible among those who did not work because of dismissal, career break, bankruptcy of their previous business, or had just finished their studies. They were unemployed when they decided to embark on professional poker. Nicu, whose business had gone bankrupt, found himself in a situation where he had no income and was in debt. Online poker appeared to him as a good alternative:

Before that I had my own business. [...] Some Internet cafe. Yeah. And when time expired [referring to the time when people in Romania started having broadband at

home and Internet cafes went out of fashion] so I had to look for alternative to this. So I start to play poker much more online than offline and live. (Nicu, 33, Romania)

Those respondents did not need to give up an activity to create time for poker. They decided that poker was the activity they wanted to do for a living and reallocated their time to playing. The unemployed stopped investing their time in job hunting. For example, Donovan from Ireland was on a career break when he decided that he wanted to become a professional player:

I was in a tournament to win 5,000 Euro [...]. It was live [offline tournament] and just decided from that that I'd start just to play constantly, to make money [...] (Donovan, 32, Ireland)

It was a combination of a personal decision, change in attitude and re-allocation of time that marked the entry into professional poker. However, this only opened a door to a series of additional changes and skills development. Some of the strategies, techniques and tools that players adopted during the second stage aimed at balancing out financial loss and making the winnings more predictable. In the next section, I describe the uncertainties and risks that professional poker players experience.

5.5.2 Managing risks and uncertainties

Many of the respondents had a backup plan when they first entered the professional poker phase. These plans allowed them to return to their old jobs in case they did not succeed with poker. For instance, Paul from France who gave up his job as a dance teacher had an arrangement that allowed him to resume his previous job in case 'things went wrong' with poker. However, he became a successful player and never returned to his previous job. Similarly, Roman from Czech Republic kept his old connections to his work as a sports trainer:

So I said ok, come on, let's try [playing poker full time]. I didn't (know?) exactly because I always can come back because I was really good for (..) coach [his previous job as a sports trainer]. I know I will find a job somewhere in the Europe for sure, even abroad. (Roman, 41, Romania)

Max from Switzerland was university student when he first started playing poker. Despite being successful from early on, he decided to graduate so that he could go back to working in a different profession if he did not succeed:

So I decided to still finish my degree because, yeah, I figured that if anything happens, for whatever reason – poker stops existing, or whatever – I mean stuff happened in the US where they couldn't play anymore – I would always be happy to have a degree and could be able to fall back and… You know, I do have a good Master's degree from a great school. So that will always help me. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

Poker is an activity with uncertain financial outcome. It is a game that contains an element of luck and it is only possible to win at an expense of other players. Thus not everyone who decides or intends to make a living out of poker succeeds. Even experienced players cannot entirely be sure about their earnings as Todor, a 22-years-old player from Bulgaria, described:

[...] let's face it: you cannot sit on the tables and win all the time. There is no person that do that. You can sit on the tables playing nice and good poker and you're gonna win more of the times because it has a luck part. [...] It has a luck part. Even if you play (..) even if you play your top game, your A-game, best poker, you still can be losing [...] (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

Also, the poker market is dynamic and affected by changing legislation. In most countries, online poker falls under laws that regulate gambling. One of the most dramatic examples of the risk coming from changing legislation goes back to 2006 when the government of the United States introduced the Unlawful Internet Gambling Enforcement Act (UIGEA) that prohibited online gambling. The event is

called 'Black Friday' in poker communities and refers to the day when online poker became illegal and created a mass of 'unemployed players' in the USA.

Although all these three players became successful professionals and never returned to their old professions, they were fully aware of the risks linked to online poker and their uncertain future. A backup plan was necessary to get them started in the first place. With time, they not only learned to cope with the situation but they began managing different areas of the self: spending considerable amount of time on skills development, on learning how to manage their emotions to mitigate the negative effects of financial loss, planning ahead, creating backup plans, optimising their play, structuring their days. The professional poker phase was shaped by players' efforts to manage various risks and uncertainties. Exploring ways to deal with risks and uncertainties became the central issue in the process of becoming a professional player. The time of emotional rollercoaster and uncoordinated exploration typical of stage I was replaced by structure, strategic thinking, planning and training. Those who were financially dependent on poker felt particularly pressured to learn about different strategies, learn from more experienced players and invest their time in training. In the next two chapters, I discuss the areas of the self that players managed, the strategies and techniques that they had learned, skills that they needed in order to succeed as professionals and the importance of these areas for the construction of the professional self. However, before I go on to discuss these in greater detail, I describe the motivation to become a professional online poker player.

5.5.3 'It gives me a different freedom and flexibility' - motivation to become a professional player

Respondents chose poker career over another profession mainly because of the flexible working arrangement and the 'possibility' to win money as for instance Max from Switzerland described:

I started playing and very soon realised that I would be making more money from playing poker full-time than I will from just working and it gives me a different freedom and flexibility, and, yeah, I guess I always enjoyed being my own boss and just doing whatever I wanna do, and it definitely gave me a lot of flexibility. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

By 'flexible working arrangement' they understood the possibility to work from home at times of their choice and autonomy. Many of the professionals expressed their discontent with a 9-to-5 job, described the problems they had with authority at work and difficulties combining their previous work with private life. They described online poker as a 'comfortable form of work' they could do from home, 'work that suited them', something that gives them autonomy and flexibility.

Many of the players emphasised 'enjoyment' as their primary motivation during the exploratory phase and financial gain or the possibility to win money as being more important during the professional poker phase. At the same time, professional players were still able to enjoy the game, or recreational players appreciated the financial gain. Richard's view illustrates the blurred line between enjoyment and financial interest:

Translated from Estonian*: It is a combination of work and hobby. What I like the most is that you can earn money with something you like. That is to say it is rather a nice leisure activity that allows you to earn money.*[18] *(Richard, 24, Estonia)*

The search for enjoyment, autonomy and financial gain were closely linked and could not strictly be allocated to a particular poker phase. Also none of the reasons that got the respondents started with online poker or their life circumstances that played a role in their decisions were specific to poker. As already indicated in Chapter 3, there is a wealth of research that shows that the need for autonomy and enjoyment is also common among creative workers

[18] Original text: Jah, elemente tööst ja hobist, et see mis mulle kôige rohkem meeldib, et see…saab raha teenida sellega, mis mulle meeldib niiöelda, et pigem on ikka meeldiv ajaviide millega jah, ônnestub ka raha teenida, et jah…pigem töö ja hobi kombo niiöelda.

(Florida, 2000, Gill, 2010, Huws, 2014) and in many types of virtual work (Huws, 1997, Schörpf et al., 2017a, Webster and Randle, 2016).

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the process of becoming a professional online poker player. I have looked for recurrent activities or events and discovered that entry into professional poker is not a one-time event but a process that can be divided in two stages. I have named the first stage exploratory and the second professional phase. The journey into professional poker typically begins with recreational playing during which a player learns the basic rules of the game, becomes familiar with the lifestyle, becomes aware of the possibility to manage some of the risks and uncertainties linked to the game and the importance of training. They learn about the shadow existence of poker as a profession, start actively looking for ways to access insider knowledge and connect to the community of other professional players. They start to practise self-discipline and learn to control their emotions. They also become aware of the importance of self-learning. However, accessing the knowledge needed and developing the necessary tolerance requires discipline, personal sacrifices and financial investments, resources that they do not all have available. The first encounter with poker is often an emotional time marked by losses and surprising wins which either encourage or discourage a player to continue the route into professional poker. Those with an existing source of income or financial support are more likely to progress.

The transition from recreational into professional poker is decision-based and often accompanied by giving up another work activity, change in attitude towards the game and re-allocation of time. I have discovered that having spare time, the possibility to create extra time and re-allocation of time were important elements in someone's decision to become a professional. In the professional poker phase, players adopted a range of strategies that helped them manage various risks and uncertainties. They began managing different areas of the self, had access to knowledge and put a great effort into training themselves.

I have observed that players chose poker work because of flexible working arrangements, enjoyment and the 'possibility' to win money. The need for autonomy was of key importance. Overall, the process of becoming a professional online poker player is challenging and tedious in many ways. Despite being aware of the risks and uncertainties players are likely to face, many of the respondents chose to transition into professional playing. In the next two chapters, I explore how the professional self is constructed, how the 'newcomers' get accepted by the wider community of players, the characteristics of this type of work and the relations of autonomy and control in professional poker.

Chapter 6: Construction of the Professional Self

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I showed how players transition from leisure oriented playing into playing poker as a work activity. This chapter explores the attributes through which the professional self is constructed and its recognition by others. In this context, I am particularly interested in the idealised image of a professional in terms of skills and competencies. The chapter unfolds in the following way. Firstly, it sheds light on the informal character of poker as a profession, and on how players distinguish a 'professional' from a recreational player. Secondly, it explores the dynamics of skills and training in forming players' individual identity. Thirdly, it explores how professional poker players communicate their activity to others, and the role of the outside world in reinforcing their identity. Fourthly, it explores how group identity is formed within online poker communities.

6.2 The distinction between a winning professional and a professional player

Formally there is no recognised profession of an 'online poker player'. Although in some countries poker players are required to declare their winnings as income (for instance in Romania) there are no procedures in place to certify their occupational status. Nevertheless for my respondents being a professional player was the same as having a regular job, having an occupation. They expressed this by stating for instance: 'It's like any other job', 'It's a job', 'I'm working', 'It's a real job'. However, what does it mean to be a professional player? What does it depend on? What criteria do players use to differentiate a professional from a recreational player? Respondents distinguished between a recreational and a professional player, as well as between two types of professionals: 'professional' and a 'winning professional' player. A 'professional' player is someone who has learned to master the game. A 'winning professional' has typically all the qualities

of a 'professional' player plus he or she also makes a living out of poker. Andrei's description illustrates this distinction:

So, in online gaming, I think there are three kinds [...] of players: professional players that live from this, good players that are knowing the knowledge of the game, they learn a lot, they read a lot, they are watching a lot of videos, they improve themselves and the people that are losing every time [...]. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

The distinction between a 'professional' and a 'winning professional' suggests that professionalism in online poker is not defined by financial success. It does not matter whether a player actually makes a living out of poker. It is enough if a player 'aspires' or 'aims to make a living' from it. This is due to the fact that only a limited number of people can win at poker despite their skills and competencies. According to some of the respondents, only five per cent of players are able to make a living out of online poker:

I realised that you can live from this [online poker] but the people that are living from this are not a big percentage [...]. Many are thinking that they can live [out of it] and because it's so many people that are playing, there are so many people that want to learn, the probability to win is every year less and less. So it's very, very hard to say that you can take a job of poker [...]. There are a percentage but I think it's not more than five per cent. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

Conversely, it is possible to win at poker without being a professional player or not a 'good enough' professional as Boris, a player from Romania, described. Although he made a small living out of poker, he lacked the skills and game-specific knowledge and was hesitant about calling himself a 'professional':

I am a winning poker player but I am not a very good poker player. I mean there isn't anyone who can…I mean poker is a thing you learn all your life. If someone tells you that he's the best poker player or he knows poker, he probably doesn't (laughing). [...] So, you continuously learn, study, practice and so…I'm just like (..)

how can I say this [...] I'm a winning poker player but I'm not professional yet or how do you say. I just aspire to be; I would like to be (laugh)... (Boris, 25, Romania)

Although financial success was not necessary for being a professional player, it could reinforce the professional status. It was easier to be recognised as a professional by family and friends if poker provides one with a steady income, according to my respondents. One of the female respondents captured the essence of being a professional player in her online blog:

Translated from Estonian: *It [playing online poker] is like any other job with the only difference that you only receive a salary when you play lots of games and if you play them well.*

As stated above, professionalism in online poker is largely defined by the ability to master the game. This means above all that a player is familiar with techniques that help reduce the risk of financial loss and make the winnings more predictable. On an everyday level, this translates into managing different areas of the self: having the right skills, learning and exploring what strategies other professionals use and keeping up to date with new developments and discussions in the poker community. The know-how, use of certain tools and techniques, and continuous efforts put into training – all facilitate the management of the various areas of the self and also form the idea of the professional self. For instance the female player of the previous quote gave an example in her online blog:

Translated from Estonian: *My personal opinion is that a professional must think differently from a recreational player. He or she must have a fixed work plan, reporting system, must invest time in professional development because knowledge about poker is easily outdated. He or she also must perceive it as a work activity which meant that he or she is an employer and an employee in one person.*

Although the identity of professional poker player is formally not recognised, informally players seem to have a clear understanding of what constitutes a professional. The following sections shed light on what skills are seen as

important and how professional players train themselves - the key attributes in becoming a professional player and forming their identity.

6.3 The role of self-management in constructing the professional self

This section explores the role of skills and competencies in constructing a sense of professionalism in online poker. Having the 'right' set of skills was important for mastering the game but also for forming a player's professional identity. Furthermore, some of the skills clearly indicated that self-organisation and self-control are important components of being a professional player. Firstly, I analyse the idealised image of a professional in terms of skills and abilities to manage the self. Secondly, I explore why some players were better prepared for a career as a professional player than others.

6.3.1 The idealised image of a professional

Most of my respondents found that a professional poker player must have the 'right' combination of skills and command resources such as time, finances and tools. For instance, Claudia from Romania, believed that a professional player must be patient, able to focus, have sufficient time and the right software tools. Although the composition of skills that my respondents considered as important varied slightly, they pointed out some core skills that they believed a successful professional player should have. According to this, an 'ideal' professional gambler should be able to work independently for long hours, be disciplined, passionate about the game, fully in control of his or her emotions and immune against any emotional upheavals that financial loss can cause. He or she should also have a profound knowledge of game rules and strategies, use software tools to support his or her game, and dispose of enough time and finances.

Some of these skills and attributes that my respondents described as important suggest that self-organisation and self-control are part of being a professional

player. The skills can broadly be divided in four categories (see Table 6.1). The first category contains knowledge about game rules and analytical skills. The second category involves skills necessary for emotional self-control, composure and self-awareness. The third category describes skills and attributes that determine 'drive', physical and mental acuity. The fourth category describes skills related to self-reliance, stamina and ability to work independently. Below, I examine these four categories in more detail.

Table 6.1: Skills and attributes relevant to professional online poker

knowledge of game rules and strategies, numerical competence, analytical thinking	**risk management through emotional self-control, composure, self-awareness**	**drive, determination, physical and mental acuity, speed**	**self-reliance ability to work independently, discipline, stamina**
knowledge of game rules and strategies	emotional discipline	motivation, passion, dedication, determination, will	self-reliance, ability to work independently
analytic intelligence, logical, rational thinking; analytical skills	mental composure, calm, control	focus, attentiveness, attention to detail, concentration	discipline, stamina, perseverance, endurance, patience
knowledge of mathematic, statistics and probabilities; numerical competence	acceptance of loss, uncertainty and the ups and downs of the game	ability to click and think fast, ability to multitask	
ability to assess risks	ability to take risk	good physical condition, not being tired, drunk or under the influence of drugs	
	acceptance, management and mitigation of risks		
	confidence, ability to suppress the ego, ability to analyse		

	oneself		
	ability to read and outsmart the opponent, ability to empathise and socialise with other players, intuition		

Source: Author (based on the skills and attributes that respondents described as important for a professional poker career. The four categories emerged from data analysis)

The first category contains skills that can mainly be characterised as analytical. It contains knowledge of game rules and strategies. Interviews demonstrated that in order to be successful a player must possess a good portion of analytical intelligence. Knowledge of mathematics, statistics, game probabilities or any kind of numerical competence helps players manage risks inherent to poker and be ahead of their opponents. Those who play poker professionally take decisions based on logic and by relying on their analytical thinking rather than on intuition. However, this alone is not enough to be successful as for instance Adrian explained:

[...] reading and understanding the fabric [referring to rules of the game] of poker is by no means a guarantee of making you a good poker player (Adrian, 28, Romania)

Additional skills and attributes are needed. The second category of skills relates to emotional intelligence and self-awareness. It includes the ability to analyse oneself, be aware of one's emotions and the ability to regulate them. These are important for managing the effects of financial loss, accepting and mitigating risks. As shown previously, playing poker for money whether offline or online involves the risk of financial loss. Udo from Estonia compared this to entrepreneurial risk-taking:

[...] poker contains risks but also doing business is risky. You need to be able to take risks to win. (Udo, 31, Estonia)

Financial loss or simply bad results can negatively affect players' performance. It can go as far as causing what is known as 'poker tilt' – depression caused by loss in poker. Being able to control those feelings is one of the many necessary skills in poker as for instance Udo and Boris described:

Translated from Estonian: *The better you are at controlling your emotions and the bigger your bankroll, the less likely it is that losses will affect you and the more you are able to associate loss with bad luck. You are able to just say that ok, it is not a good day for me, close your computer, forget about poker for a while, go and eat with your friends, read a book. [if someone is able to control their emotions] Losses do not affect your emotional state, you can control it and you do not get suddenly upset.*[19] *(Udo, 31, Estonia)*

I mean, people who are winning studied a lot and worked a lot on their game to get there. And there's a psychological part to it too. Like it's not enough if you play well. You have to control your feelings. (Boris, 25 years old from Romania)

A player who is in control of his or her emotions was described as 'emotionally balanced', 'peaceful', 'relaxed', 'calm' and 'in a good mental state' – a desirable state of mind for those who experience uncertainty and the ups and downs of the game on a daily basis. Paul described the context many players are in:

You really have to have a really good resistance to the swings: to the winning big and losing big. Because when I say you can win 3k a month, that doesn't mean every month you will have 3k on your account. That means sometimes you will win 20, sometimes you will lose 70 but in average you will win 3k. So it's a lot of madness [...], it's really hard. So if you don't have an iron mind and iron nerves and you are

[19] Original text: Et (..) et mida parem sa oled, selles mõttes, et siukese emotsioonide kontrollimises, mida suurem su bank-roll, seda vähem see kaotus sind mõjutab, seda rohkem sa tunned, et see on variatsioon,et see on halb õnn, et sa tunned et, okei, et täna ei ole minu päev, sa paned selle arvuti kinni, pühid selle pokkeri peast, et lähed oma lähedastega sööma onju, loed raamatut onju, funnid, et ei ole mingit probleemi, et see kaotus ei (..) muuda su emotsionaalset nagu olekut, seisundit, halvemaks. Et sa vabalt kontrollid, et sa, et sa, sul ei teki siukest, nagu ütleme mingit siukest nagu äkkvihahoogu.

not balanced and happy in your life already, it's the worst thing to do. (Paul, 31, France)

Ability to manage emotions is therefore the basis of a successful poker career. Respondents emphasised repeatedly that a player must not be scared of taking risks of which the management of emotions was a part. Some interviewees pointed out that a professional should also be able to empathise with his or her virtual opponents and predict their moves in the game. This is a basis for 'bluffing' that is a widely used strategy in poker. Some players master it intuitively; others rely on probabilities and statistics.

The third category describes what drives people to play poker and the physical and mental conditions that are required to exercise the activity on a professional level. When respondents first started playing many of them were driven by 'passion'. They were highly motivated and dedicated to getting to know the game. Some of them were determined to become professionals. Although these emotions are likely to diminish with time they remain part of the image what a professional 'should' be like. Claudia from Romania underlined this when I asked her to compare the essence of poker with other activities:

Translated from Romanian: *First of all, the time that you have to devote to it, the skills that you need to have, the patience, very much, and the desire to play, the passion. This is about it. (Claudia, 22, Romania)*

In addition to passion and dedication, a professional player also needs to be physically and mentally fit so that he or she can work in a highly concentrated manner – typically for many consecutive hours. A successful professional should be able to multitask, click and think fast – skills that are necessary to cope with the speed in online poker.

The skills and attributes that I listed in the second and third category refer to regulation of everything bodily and most notably emotions, thoughts and physical abilities. Data suggested that an ideal professional player is expected to nurture,

curb, generate, control and train emotions such as fear, depression, joy, passion, motivation, empathy and train their body or physical acuity. This is in line with body-work-practices on the self that people manage as part of the project of the self as shown in Chapter 3.

The fourth and last category describes qualities that a professional player needs to be able to work independently. Professional players were either working on their own or were partly controlled by a coach/ sponsor. Some of the respondents shared their living and workspace with other players. In the next chapter, I explore the different forms of work organisation. Yet, regardless of the arrangement, my respondents reported that a professional player needs qualities similar to a self-employed worker:

Translated from Estonian: *A person who needs to be prodded cannot play poker. [...]. You need to understand that you are managing your work time yourself [...]. It is important that a player is able to work independently and is able to sit at a computer [for long hours]. It's not the case that you just finish your working day and clock off - you need to work in a very focused manner.*[20] *(Katariina, 39, Estonia)*

These qualities include, for instance, discipline, patience, self-reliance and stamina which help the player stay motivated and focused for long hours, regulate working time, manage finances and assess game-related risks. This shows that professional players are expected to organise their daily work activities themselves, be proactive and disciplined.

Players believed that a professional has, or aspires to have, skills from each of these four categories. However, a strong presence of qualities or skills in one category could sometimes compensate for shortcomings in others. For instance, if a player is passionate about the game it can balance out their lack of discipline. It is the 'passion' that drives them to spend long hours playing in front of a

[20] Original text: Et pokkerit ei saa mängida inimene, kes vajab mingit tagant torkimist vôi sihukest asja. [...] Sa pead ise...ise aru saama sellest, et ma reguleerin ise oma tööaega [...] Et selles môttes see iseseisva töö vôime ja tahtmine nagu istuda arvuti taga [...] mitte lihtsalt, et ma tegin selle töö ära ja panen linnukese kirja vaid just see, et sa pead nagu kogu aeg täis tähelepanuga tööd tegema.

computer. Or someone with a strong intuition may take decisions based on intuition rather than analytical thinking. Various combinations of skills are possible. Even if a player does not possess skills from one of the four categories many of respondents pointed out that in the longer term it is important to aim at having them. I also noticed that the skills requirement were slightly different depending on whether someone played offline or online poker. However, those players who alternated between these two regarded the skills they had learned through either forms of poker as complementary as for instance Paul explained:

[...] people from the Internet [online poker players] are a lot better than people from live [offline poker players] because I [an online poker player] accumulate more experience in the short time. But they [online poker players] have less skill in psychology [...] but more mathematic skills and people who are playing only live have more psychological skills and they can fight each other almost with no disadvantage. And people who play both live and online will be close to be perfect poker player and will have a big edge out of his opponents. (Paul, 31, France)

Those who wanted to become professional (or good professional) players sought to match the idealised image of a professional with regard to skills. However, as the analyses showed, the definition of the 'right' set of skills is open to interpretation. It is only defined by four broad categories of skills or two forms of work on the self: body-work-practices on the self and self-directed organisation of daily work activities. Data also indicated that the 'ideal' composition of skills is not static but changing over time, whereas the two areas of the self remain constant. There was an implicit pressure to refine the existing skills, stay informed about new trends in the poker community and adapt accordingly. This was regardless of whether someone had been playing and learning for years, had acquired the skills through a previous activity, had a natural talent or was a beginner with very few skills. The next section explores why some players were better than others at working on their body and emotions, and better prepared for a career as a professional player.

6.3.2 Some are better prepared for a career as a professional player

Data revealed that some people were better skilled at managing different areas of the self than others when they first started playing online poker. But were these people simply talented or had they acquired their skills through another activity? If so, what were the activities that provided the persons with the 'right combination' of skills? As none of the skills described in the previous section are specific to poker, except for the knowledge about poker rules and strategies, they could be acquired independently. Data revealed that people who had played online games were better equipped for online poker and had an edge over other players. From the 32 players I interviewed 18 indicated that they had been or still were playing online games at the time of the interview. Some of them earned money through these games; others played them solely for pleasure. Only seven interviewees indicated that they had never played and the other seven did not inform me about their preferences for games. The type of games my respondents were involved in were mostly competitive games that classify as e-sport (a form of competitive sport that is based on digital technology) such as Counter-Strike, Dota, Starcraft, Call of Duty, League of Legends and many others, or role-playing games such as World of Warcraft and Diablo III. With regard to all of these games, there was a variety of skills that could be transferred to online poker. According to my respondents, most of the games that are played online teach how to click fast by using a computer mouse, multitask, make fast game-related decisions and patience (spending long hours in front of a computer). Strategy games teach analytical thinking, logic and understanding of complex systems. Games that involve playing against real world players (versus computer systems) teach the ability to read and outsmart the opponent. All these skills are equally important in online poker.

A few players also described their passion for card games (other than poker). One interviewee played the card game 'Magic: The Gathering' at a professional level by making a living out of it. It is a trading card game that exists in online and offline versions and requires a similar set of skills to online poker. A few of the respondents cited chess and physical sport as activities that helped them develop skills they could directly apply to online poker. However, the range of skills that

could be transferred was limited compared to online games. Physical sport, and especially when exercised professionally, teaches emotional discipline, mental composure, patience and concentration. For instance, Udo from Estonia described his experience with boxing and karate that taught him patience and how to cope with emotional stress – skills that he also applied to online poker. In addition to this, chess teaches analytical thinking. Todor from Bulgaria described how high level poker coaches use yoga to teach players mental composure.

However, the linkage between different games, especially online games and online poker was not only limited to skills. I discovered that there was something else that all these players had in common – something that was more difficult to grasp as it was subtler than skills which were easier to name. It was the players' or game 'mentality': the fascination, passion for games, the 'way of thinking', maybe even the 'way of life' that they all had in common and that was transferred alongside the skills. It emerged when I explored my respondents' life beyond poker. For instance Morten from Norway described his love for betting. Morten was a professional online poker player who shared his living and workspace with other professional players. They all had a strong passion for betting which extended to different situations in everyday life:

[...] when we met up at the airport, there was two lines in the security. There is a bet, at once. Last man [who gets through] has to pay the beers on the airplane and so on. And when we wait for the luggage we bet. Who gets it first, who gets it last [...]. We started betting on what the other people would think our age was. So it didn't matter if they were right. It was like if we started betting on like what you would think my age is and then we made a bet, we asked what you think. So we started betting like that.

The 'urge to play' was characteristic of the 'players' mentality'. It could manifest in playing online games or extend to other areas of life. Data showed that it facilitated the switch between different games including online poker. The fascination for games could be transferred alongside the skills and between recreational and professional playing as Stojan from Bulgaria described:

There is this big, very successful poker group – people playing poker who come from the gaming background when they were playing World of Warcraft and all this. [...] They are the best players because they think in another way. They are the best online players. (Stojan, 40, Bulgaria)

Data also revealed that there were player communities that relocated together to online poker from a different game. In those cases, players were not only transferring their skills but also their networks and trust within these. Overall, some players were better prepared for a career as a professional player because they were already familiar with the lifestyle, their physical and mental acuity was better developed, they had access to player communities and were experienced in managing their emotions. People who had played online games were particularly well equipped for a career as a professional poker player. Those players had a shorter settling in time and a comparative advantage over those who were new to the game. The next section explores how players access insider knowledge and how players' individual identity is formed.

6.4 Self-directed learning

This section looks at how players trained themselves and its importance in forming their identity as professional players. Learning was an integral part of a professional poker player's career. The process started as early as in the exploratory poker phase when a player learned the basic rules of the game and reached its peak time during the transition into professional poker when players acquired a broad range of new skills that helped them master the game. For many of the professional players, learning remained part of their daily work routine once they had settled into their new profession.

Drawing on my interview data, I decided to distinguish between 'initial training' and 'continuing training'. The first describes a time during which players build up their skills in order to reach the level of professionalism and the latter a time

during which these skills are being topped up. These two periods are very similar when it comes to the skills and competencies that players acquire but I noticed a difference regarding the way they experience these times. Respondents experienced the time of initial training as an intense, 'crazy' time, spurred by passion, whereas the time of continuing training was shaped by routine, regularity and sometimes by loss of passion and motivation. Firstly, this section explores the characteristics of initial and continuing training and their role in constructing a professional identity. Secondly, it shows how players access insider knowledge.

6.4.1 'Entrance test' into the profession

The majority of my respondents believed that someone's professional success depends largely on personal attributes, competencies and skills, some of which can be learned, and the right use of tools and techniques. As already stated above, a professional player should be able to master the game which broadly translates into the ability to control and manage different areas of the self and knowing the basic rules of the game. Training was seen as a key to becoming a professional player as for instance Max, a 29-year-old player from Switzerland described:

I mean a lot of people play this for enjoyment [...] they're playing for fun. And obviously that's okay if this is your goal – to have fun while you play [...]. But if you're also trying to make money [play professionally] you gotta take this very serious and study the game because there's a lot of things you need to learn. It's like trying to play chess professionally - you gotta learn certain opening positions, [...], certain moves, you gotta learn certain patterns, you gotta learn the opening game, the mid-game, the end game. You just gotta learn certain things and basically have certain tools at your disposal while you play and the same thing applies to poker. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

I use the term 'initial training' for the time during which a player learns about a range of topics in order to become a professional. Respondents experienced this

period as intense and exhausting time describing it for instance as a 'crazy' time, and a time during which they needed to work or study 'very hard'. Some of the players expressed the intensity of initial training by describing their personal sacrifices and the negative influence on their work-life balance. It had a negative impact on their sleep, social life or family time. For instance, Peeter sacrificed his social life for poker training:

Translated from Estonian: *I invested lots of time in learning and developing my skills and practiced 'no-life' that is to say I didn't do anything else beyond poker. I had no social life. And now I consider myself as a winning professional player. I live off it.*[21] *(Peeter, 24, Estonia)*

Other respondents expressed the intensity of this period by listing possible reasons why another player or players they knew did not reach the level of professionalism. These could be 'family commitments', 'lack of discipline', 'lack of passion for the game' or simply 'lack of time' that hindered them. Overall, there was a strong emphasis on discipline but also on dedication, patience, concentration, strong will, motivation and focus that one must have in order to get through the initial training and reach the level of professionalism in online poker.

But what gave the time of initial training such a degree of intensity? On the one hand it was the number of subjects that a player needed to become familiar with, on the other hand it was the need to put this knowledge into practice and 'accumulate experience'. In online poker, accumulating experience largely manifests in playing at multiple tables, and playing a large number of poker hands if possible in a short period of time. This type of intense playing was possible thanks to 'multi-tabling' – a feature that many online poker platforms offer. While in offline poker a player can only play at one table at a time and a limited number of hands in an hour, in online poker it is possible to play at multiple tables and

[21] Original text: Ja ma õppisin, arenesin ja niiöelda no-life'isin (?) ehk siis ma ei teinud mitte midagi muud, kui ainult...väga vähe käisin väljas ja praktiliselt pühendasin oma aja aint sellele, et jõuda kõrgemale ja saada paremaks. Ja seda ma ka suutsin teha, see võttis aega (...) ja nüüd ma ennast pean niiöelda võitvaks elukutseliseks mängijaks. Ja elatun sellest.

increase the number of hands played in an hour. However, this requires a specific set of skills such as the ability to multitask, focus, manage workload-related stress, take quick decisions and 'click fast' as for instance, Paul explained:

So you need to find the best strategy and still you have to think really, really fast and think really, really fast [he repeated it several times] [...] [You have to be] fast in your thinking and fast with your fingers. (Paul, 31, France)

Being able to play at multiple tables increases one's chances of creating a sustainable income because losses at some tables can be balanced out by wins at other tables. Also the hourly rate that one earns from poker is likely to increase when a player plays more than one game at a time. Obviously those who already possess the competencies that multi-tabling require progress faster in their poker career. For instance, players who had played computer games were better at switching between multiple tables and screens, as Stanko from Bulgaria explained:

In order to be able to successfully do that, to multi table, you have to be good at multitasking and you need to have a so called high APM. APM is actions per minute. And APM is actually a term which is used in gaming, online gaming, not gambling. And since I used to play a lot of games before that, computer games, I had a pretty decent APM so I could react really fast about, you know, even moving the mouse to specific position on the monitor [this is required when a player needs to move between multiple poker tables on a computer screen]. That was something, which you know, some people do better than others [...] I can do that you know, I can start clicking to a lot of place and this is what you actually have to do when you play poker because you need to be able to not only make the decision in your mind but actually confirm it on the screen. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

Those who had learned to manage the pace through another activity had a comparative advantage over 'inexperienced players'. For instance, Paul talked about a success story of another professional player who had learned to manage the pace through playing online games:

[He] was maybe the second best player in the world. He finished second in the world championship of Starcraft [an online game]. And then he made the transition to poker. And he was really, really successful because he can click and think really, really fast. So he was playing like 20 tables at the same time, 40 tables at the same time [...]. And he just played…I don´t know, 2,000 hands per hour when I was playing 100 [he probably meant 1,000] hands an hour. So he was accumulating experience twice fast as me or as all other player. So he become really successful and he won a lot and a lot of tournaments. (Paul, 31, France)

Data showed that the duration of the time during which players acquired a broad range of poker knowledge could vary between a month and a few years. For instance, Rando from Estonia started playing poker professionally after having trained himself for half a year. However, only a few respondents could give such an exact response about the duration. Many of the players stayed vague about the duration stating simply that 'it takes a while' or 'you need to invest a lot of time'. This uncertainty may be due to the fact that they never stopped learning and developing their skills.

The time of initial training was an important step in becoming a professional player. It was an intense and exhausting time that affected players' work-life balance and only those who had the 'right' set of skills and were dedicated enough succeeded. The fact that not everyone emerged as a professional player after spending time on learning a broad range of topics suggests that initial training is comparable with an 'entrance test' into the profession that only some players pass. The initial training transitions into what I have termed 'continuing training' – a theme that I explore in the next section.

6.4.2 Keeping up with new developments

Once a player had reached the level of professional poker, his or her focus switches from 'accumulating experience' and learning new skills to 'keeping up to

date' with new developments in the poker community and refining their existing skills – a period which has been termed 'continuing training' for the purpose of this analysis. The time of continuing training was shaped by routine and regularity which some of my respondents blamed for the loss of passion they experienced during this time.

Similar to the time of initial training, respondents felt that in order to be a professional player they 'needed' to train themselves, and that it was a 'must do' for every professional player. Todor's metaphorical statement captured the essence of it:

Poker is [...] like a river. And if you [...] stop rowing for just a month you are so far behind that you can never catch up. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

On a more practical level, some of the respondents felt pressured to keep up with the 'constant stream' of new strategies and tools that were being developed in the poker community. Learning about these was part of their daily or weekly work routine as for instance Stanko explained:

Yes, you can reach a certain level [...], become a winning player but from then on you have to constantly continue evolving because the game itself evolves. Every day something changes, every day. Because the rules are there but the way that the game is played changes. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

Compared to the time of initial training, respondents allocated less time to training. They typically spent less than half of their working time on topping up their skills or were vague, saying for instance that training 'does not take much of their time'. For instance, Todor referred to 30 per cent as the share of his working time he dedicated to training:

Well, usually if I have ten hour work like three of them are for studying: reviewing hands, watching videos stuff like that. [...]. So you can say 30 per cent of my time has been in coaching materials, videos. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

With regard to duration, most respondents strongly believed that skills development was important throughout the entire poker career and a permanent feature of professional poker. They believed that a (professional) player should never stop learning: '*poker is a thing you learn all your life', 'you continuously learn, study, practice…'* as for instance Boris from Romania explained. This suggests that self-learning as a form of 'work on the self' was deeply embedded in their individual understanding of what constitutes a professional. Learning activities also brought them together with other players who usually worked in isolation and helped keep in touch with the poker community reinforcing their role in the community.

However, not everyone could keep pace with changing trends or was motivated enough to train themselves throughout their entire poker career. It was mentally demanding and it required availability of resources such as time and money. Yet, a professional player as described by many of my respondents should not flinch from spending long hours on training, be passionate about every aspect of poker, patient, dedicated and very disciplined. However, in reality the passion that most of the players felt for poker when they first started diminished over time, especially during the professional poker phase and affected their motivation for spending extra (unpaid) time on training. For instance, Katariina from Estonia described her loss of interest in training:

Translated from Estonian: *Initially I liked to learn because I wanted to and now I need to force myself to do so...to read and watch [training] videos [...].*[22] *(Katariina, 39, Estonia)*

I encountered different strategies that players developed in order to 'keep going' despite the loss of passion and motivation. Having a mentor, a coach or a trainer was the most popular way to overcome these difficulties and continue regular training.

[22] Original text: Et alguses ma ju õppisin lihtsalt sellepärast, et ma tahtsin. Ja nüüd ma peaksin ennast sundima, et..et võtta endast käsile ja loe ja vaata [...]

Overall, the intense, tedious process of learning was part of constructing players' individual identity. Both continuing training and initial training played an important role in this. Self-directed learning helped players stay competitive, manage risks but also maintain their image as a professional and stay connected with other members of the poker community. The strong emphasis on self-directed practices of learning suggests that despite being outside the scope of traditional employment and not being publicly recognised as an occupation, the community of professional players had adopted the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity that is constituted through practices of self-management and self-control as discussed in Chapter 3. The next section explores how professionals accessed insider knowledge.

6.4.3 Access to insider knowledge

I observed different ways to access insider knowledge. Respondents accessed it by browsing through online forums, reading training materials on websites, watching training videos, or through knowledge exchange with other players or a personal trainer. Reading online resources and watching training videos were the most popular, especially during the time of initial training. These sources were easily accessible. Books were more popular among older respondents and those who had also played or were playing offline poker. Many of them combined books with online resources.

However, exchanging knowledge, ideas and information with other players was seen as superior. Many of the players strived for 'feedback', 'developing new knowledge', 'analysing the game', 'learning from mistakes', 'finding new tricks' and 'developing new moves'. These practices were particularly popular among experienced players who wanted to refine their existing skills and keep up to date with new developments. It was all about finding something new and unusual – for instance a new strategy that would give them an advantage over other players. Roman described his motives for discussing his game with others:

Sometimes it's nice to speak about...you know, with someone because he is opening your eyes. (Roman, 41, Czech Republic)

These exchanges took place with one or more friends or strangers. Those who did not have a personal coach wished they had one, as it was the case with Indrek:

Translated from Estonian*: I have never had a personal trainer. I have also wondered why I never had one because I think highly of coaches or believe that this is the most efficient way to improve [poker skills]. For some reason I have never had one. I have got friends with whom I developed together and with whom I have discussed my game but I haven't even had a group of people that is very popular nowadays – like young people who are forming groups and meeting up on Skype. I am rather a loner in this regard, which is certainly not the right path. And I also think that this [not having a personal trainer] has been a bit silly of me.*[23] *(Indrek, 38, Estonia)*

However, having a personal coach required availability of financial resources that not all of the players had. This explains the popularity of staking arrangements among those with fewer or no resources. Staking typically allows a player to access a trainer in exchange for a share of their winnings. Another alternative to hiring a coach was knowledge exchange with fellow players. These exchanges took place in person or online with people who knew each other or between strangers. Richard, a young player from Estonia was part of such a group that organised regular Skype meetings:

Translated from Estonian*: Yes, we have a Skype group consisting of the best tournament players in Estonia. With these players we have daily [discussions]. We*

[23] Original text: Vat, treenerit mul ei ole kunagi olnud. Et seda ma olen ise ke môelnud, et kuidas ma huvitav sellest olen kôrvale hoidnud, et kuigi ma tegelikult hindan seda väga kôrgelt vôi arvan, et see on kôige tôhusam tee saada paremaks. Siis millegipärast mul endal ei ole jah coach-i olnud kunagi. On olnud küll sôbrad, kellega neid asju koos on nagu edasi arenetud ja arutatud aga..aga ei ole jah isegi olnud sellist nagu gruppi, mis on tänapäeval ka väga sagedane. Nagu noored tulevad nii skaibis kui ka jah, teevad sihukseid ühissessioone nagu et ei ole ka seda teinud. Aga ma olen pigem nagu sihukene üksinda kulgeja olnud selles asjas. Mis ei ole kindlasti ôige tee. Ja ma arvan, et tegelikult see on natuke rumal olnud.

help each other and learn together. Some of them have become friends with each other. This is a great help. I also have friends in addition to this [group] whom I knew before, who also play and with whom we discuss [the game]. This is a great support. If you have a group of people with whom you can develop together this is the best support you can get.[24] *(Richard, 24, Estonia)*

This type of teaming up for the purpose of becoming better at poker could even go as far as players temporarily moving in together. For instance, Morten from Norway was part of such a group of players that shared their living and working space. The group had created their own rules and boundaries. While everyone was responsible for their own game and their own finances, learning was shared in the form of regular discussions:

But we also helped each other. So we discussed like I got in, let's just say, I had this scenario today, what would you do? In this scenario, would you bet? Would you fold? Would you raise? What do you think? This sort of… we trained each other. And we didn't keep, we just agreed on not keeping secrets. I sort of developed a new skill because online poker was new. So if I sort of developed a new skill or learned that by doing this I can win more money, I shared it straight away. (Morten, 37, Norway)

All these players shared the same passion – poker. However, the main purpose of this type of 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998, Saint-Onge and Wallace, 2015) was to create an active learning space and gain an edge over other players. The players were in competition with each other yet they shared new knowledge.

Overall, I observed that players combined different ways to access insider knowledge as for instance Paul described:

[24] Original text: Jah, meil on…Skaibis on grupp, Eesti turniiri…parimad turniiri mängijad, kellega meil on noh igapäevased..aitame üksteist ja ôpime ja noh, kellest on ka niisama sôbrad saanud, et see on jah väga suur abi. Ja siis…ja mul on veel sôpru kellega ka nagu keda ma teadsin juba enne, kes ka mängivad ja kellega ka ikka arutame ja. See on väga suur tugi tegelikult, et…kui sul on seltskond, kellega koos areneda, see on nagu kôige suurem tugi tegelikult üldse.

Most of the time I was trying to learn by reading books, talking with my friends about strategy and trying to become better and playing. (Paul, 31, France)

The combination was dependent on personal preference and on availability of their resources. The next section explores how professional poker players communicate their activity to others, and the role of poker communities in reinforcing their identity.

6.5 'My parents think it's a bit weird...' - players' selective disclosure of their activity

This section explores how players communicated their work activity to their family, friends and wider environment: how was it perceived by others and what role did these reactions play in forming their occupational identity? Whether someone was a recreational or a professional player, many of my respondents were cautious about telling others about their interest in poker. They typically assessed the likelihood of facing prejudices or being understood before telling about their activity and tended to avoid people who they thought might not approve of it. Those outsiders who had come into contact with poker were more likely to approve of it. It was also a matter of age – young people were more likely to react positively. When professional players presented their activity as work, they experienced one of these five reactions: complete refusal, acceptance after an initial refusal, surprise and suspicion, understanding and support, indifference. Those who understood and recognised poker as work were typically partners, friends and young people in general. Many of them played poker themselves or aspired to play. Parents and partners' parents were often among those who did not recognise it as work or people who had never played poker. They associated poker with a negative image linked to loss of money, debts, addiction, waste of time or even crime. As a response, players tried to distance themselves from this image and invested lots of energy into throwing light on their activity, explaining and convincing them otherwise. Stanko from Bulgaria described his experience with prejudices:

[...] usually it's perceived like (..) not good. Usually not good because people (…) when you say 'I play poker professionally' (…) everyone assumes, if they don´t understand poker, they assume that in order for you to actually make money out of it, you have to be lucky. When in reality, luck has very little to do with it. In the long run like I said, it's all based on skill. So most people because they don't understand this about the game, they assume that [...] you are just getting lucky all the time, which is of course not the case. So, the first reaction is usually a bit cynical like: 'No, you can't be professional', 'You can't make money out of that', 'You will lose it all some day and all that', which (..) yes, if you don't have the discipline you can lose it all but this is why I mentioned discipline is so important [...] (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

After experiencing all these various reactions, players became selective about whom they told about their activity. Being selective could also mean that they only revealed a few details about their work and kept quiet about others. For instance, Sebi from Romania kept his losses a secret from his girlfriend:

I told her some of the times when I won a big amount of money but when I started losing or when I won a small amount of money I didn't tell her everything. (Sebi, 22, Romania)

Others disguised their poker work by saying for instance that they were working on an 'online project' or that they were doing 'something on the Internet' without revealing any further details as for instance Roman from Romania did:

If I feel that people will not understand [...] I don't want to speak about it, you know. I don't like to speak much about with people who do not understand this, you know. To explain, you know, I am not the gambler and that poker is mathematic, [...] psychology, you know. They don't understand this, you know. And so I am just, [this is what he tells about his activity] I am working with the Internet. (Roman, 41, Czech Republic)

There was also a category of players that next to their poker work, had a salaried work or owned a business which they used as their 'public face' when they feared prejudices even if in reality poker work took up the majority of their time. Some of my respondents had opened a poker-related business when they were still playing poker professionally. They felt that such a business brought them more acceptance.

These responses reveal that recognition of online poker as a work activity was poor outside of poker communities. Players faced prejudices and felt forced to distance themselves from the negative image associated with poker. Some of the players became reserved and decided to disguise their activity. However, within poker communities, players typically experienced recognition and understanding. This type of distinction between 'insiders' (referring to poker communities) and 'outsiders' (referring to the world outside of such communities) suggests that poker communities play an important role in constructing a shared identity as a professional. The next section explores how respective group boundaries are constructed and a collective identity as a professional player formed.

6.6 Identity formation within online poker communities

The majority of my respondents worked in isolation from each other; nevertheless they performed their work in a similar way (in the next chapter, I describe their work practices in more detail), used similar slang words and admired the same celebrity players. I observed that many of the similarities were formed in and the sense of 'togetherness' reinforced by being part of poker communities. These communities of practice came in different forms but most of them were formed for the purpose of knowledge exchange, mutual support and coaching. In addition, players socialised, formed friendships and planned their leisure-time activities with other professionals either within these communities and/ or in separate ones that were formed solely for this purpose. Some of the communities existed online without any face to face contact between their members or vice versa, with members only meeting in person. Others combined elements of both. In some of the groups members knew each other and were

aware of how many people participated, others were anonymous and individual members did not know the exact size of the group. In some communities, members went in and out according to their needs and interests, in others there were membership requirements. Players could be part of multiple communities at once and throughout their career.

My respondents reported about local communities that lived and worked in close proximity but also about national and global groups. For instance, Paul described a community that brought together the 'most successful' players in France. At the time of the interview, they were planning a collective action against a tax law issued by the French government. This law did not take into account players' financial losses and expenses such as buy-ins into tournaments. As a response, the group had emigrated abroad and was preparing for a law-suit as Paul described:

Yeah, we have a forum. We speak with each other. We have a lot of different lawyers. [...] We really want to make a collective action to make the government aware of the mistake they are making. [...] They don't understand, they don't know what is a buy-in. They don't know what is a cash game tournament, they don't understand anything and they don't want to know. [...] They are not expert in poker. So they don't understand how it works. [...] They don't know about tournaments, cash games, online, live…they just mix everything in their head. They don't understand anything. [...] So we need the government to have advisers from ex-poker player experts to explain the poker is working like this. So you have variance, you have luck involved. [...] In poker you can win one year and lose the year after. [...] So that's why you need a different way to pay taxes. And they don't care. They don't want to listen and they just want to take everything from us. [...] That's why all poker players went to Malta, UK...places where it's clear that we don't have to pay. So I didn't have the choice. (Paul, 31, France)

The community that was dispersed physically gained another dimension when its members collectively decided to move to same locations abroad – a national group had transformed into several local ones. In another example previously discussed, Sorin told about a community that only existed virtually (its members

collaborated virtually and had never met in person). They moved between various online games before they collectively decided to relocate to online poker and continue supporting each other. These examples suggest that poker communities are mobile and flexible both virtually and physically.

Irrespective of the form, structure, size or purpose that these communities served, being part of such a group gave players an opportunity to discuss their work with other professionals, spend time with people who understood their activity, did not judge them, understood poker-specific slang words and had a similar lifestyle, according to my respondents. For instance, Udo described a community he was part of that organised joint social activities, but it also served as a platform for discussions and knowledge exchange:

Translated from Estonian*: There are poker forums [...] and several web pages that connect players. You can find on them everything related to poker starting with poker strategies and so on. I know these pages because one of my friends is a professional player and a few more friends. I know these people and I have spent my free time with them. We go to bars and drinking. And when we are out I ask them questions, we talk about poker. You can talk about poker infinitely. This game develops all the time. New formats emerge and you need to keep your eye on these new developments.* [25] *(Udo, 31, Estonia)*

Many of my respondents welcomed the combination of work-related discussions and joint leisure-time activities. Regardless of whether they were based in Romania, Estonia or elsewhere, they reported similar patterns of support and lifestyle. For instance, they reported that social events among professional players tended to involve excessive consumption of alcoholic drinks and in general, being

[25] Original text: [...] Et on olemas need pokkeri, pokkerifoorumid [...] ja mitu lehte, mis siis ühendavad endas mängijaid, seal on siis kõik, mis pokkeriga seondub, et alates siis pokkeristrateegiate ja nii ja naa ja ma tean sealt niiöelda siis tänu sellele, et mu (.) üks sõber mängib (..) elukutselistest ja veel mõned sõbrad, et üldiselt ma tean seda ringkonda ja ma olen nendega ka ütleme niiöelda vaba aega koos veetnud, et läheme kuskile baari ja teeme drinke ja ja siis ma küsin nagu infot, et me räägime pokkerist, et (.) siis pokkerist võib alati lõputult rääkida, et see mäng areneb kogu aeg, et tulevad uued formaadid ja (..) ja võibolla on mingi uus nagu formaat [...]see ongi siuke vajalik info, et sa nagu hoiad silma peal, mis toimub seal.

lavish with money or this was what some of my respondents felt was expected from them. Another example involved the cult of the same celebrity players and the use of common language. The similarities that I observed suggest that in these communities, players aligned their values and lifestyle. Hence the communities helped form a sense of 'togetherness' and reinforce the feeling of being part of a bigger group as for instance, Todor and Max described:

Well, maybe we...like all the lawyers, they have their own thing or all the doctors have their own thing. Maybe we are like a group or something. We have (…) similarities. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

I see the same set of people over and over and it's fun. They turn into kind of like my life friends too, because, yeah, you share kind of the same profession, the same destiny, the same pains, and yeah, they turn into your friends. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

However, not every professional player subscribed to the values and could identify themselves with the lifestyle. Data revealed that active membership in poker communities could create a moral dilemma and put players under the pressure to either follow a lifestyle they did not approve of or be excluded from the community. Stanko from Bulgaria captured the dilemma that some players faced:

[...] you start hanging out together and sometimes you find you have obviously one interest, which binds you all and that's poker.[...] So of course they wanna go out and wanna go to clubs you know, meet other people, meet women and all that. So usually yeah, they hang out together. But it's a very strange kind of relationship because you could have just taken the guy's money on the table or beat them in a tournament and then you go out drinking, you know, it's...it's a bit strange but it definitely works. It definitely works. It's like with any other group of people who have, who shares similar interests. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

As a response to this, some players felt ambivalent about forming friendships with fellow professionals and/ or avoided playing against them. They made a clear

distinction between 'fish' (casual players) and professional players. As I describe in Chapter 7, some respondents made use of 'fish finders' – digital tools that helped recognise casual players online. Yet being excluded from poker communities created another dilemma. Participation was not only important for professional development but also for getting fully recognised as a professional player. Given that the recognition by the 'outside' world was poor and that there is no formal institution that would regulate poker as a profession, some players felt the pressure to 'stick' together with 'insiders' by subscribing to their norms and values.

In this section, I have demonstrated that the sense of being part of the same occupation is formed partly through patterns of mutual support and coaching, partly through construction of common language and the cult of 'famous players'. Poker communities provide a platform for these exchanges and therefore play an important role in forming a shared identity. However, my data showed that through active participation players can nevertheless face dilemmas that are difficult to solve.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the poker player's professional self is constructed. It is formed as a combination of internal individual and external collective processes. The first half of the chapter has explored the internal individual processes of identity formation. It has discussed the definition of skills and learning as the key elements of forming players' individual identity. Professional players constantly learn new and refine existing skills with the aim of mastering the game and matching the idealised image of a professional which is defined by two forms of work on the self: body-work-practices on the self and self-directed organisation of daily work activities. Data has shown that professional players must be able to manage their emotions, train their body or physical acuity and organise their daily work activities. However, the 'ideal' combination of skills that is needed for these forms of 'work on the self' is dynamic and open to interpretation. The chapter has also described how players go through an intense

initial training, continue topping up their skills throughout their careers and the importance of self-directed learning for players' identity formation. Data has shown that some players were better skilled than others when they started their career because they were already familiar with the lifestyle and had acquired the necessary skills through their previous activity, most commonly through online gaming. Some of them transferred their fascination for games along with the skills. These descriptions of skills and competencies have given valuable insights into learning practices among virtual workers but they have also told another story – the story of self-management and the construction of the entrepreneurial self among professional online poker players.

The second half of the chapter has described how collective identity develops based on patterns of mutual support and coaching but also on the cult of celebrity players and a common language which is used with both insiders and outsiders. In a broader sense, learning was also the vehicle for the development of group identity. Due to the pressure to keep up with new trends and refine and learn new skills, professional players who usually work in isolation sought contact with other players for the purpose of knowledge exchange and support. They formed communities of practice that helped form the sense of 'togetherness', served as platforms for professional norms and values and were important for internal validation of their work. I have observed that professional players recognised each other as such. However, because it was a 'hidden' identity it lacked wider social validation as in the case of formally recognised professions. Professional players were reluctant to talk about their activity outside of poker communities because they faced prejudices.

This chapter has discovered that self-organisation and self-control are of crucial importance in forming the professional self among online poker players. The next chapter is concerned with how professional players organise their labour and manage the different areas of the self.

Chapter 7: The structuring factors in the daily life of professional online poker players: work organisation, autonomy and control

7.1 Introduction

In the last two chapters, I looked in some detail at how people become professional poker players and form their occupational identity. This chapter investigates what these professionals do all day and how their work is organised. Firstly, it describes how they structure their working days and their work practices. It searches for commonalities between geographically isolated players. Secondly, it explores the factors that shape and structure the daily life of professional players. This includes an analysis of external and self-imposed factors and the extent to which players are able to maintain their autonomy from external control. The chapter then investigates the relations of autonomy and control both among stakees and independent players.

7.2 Independent players and 'stakees'

In order to explore the daily life of online poker players and the social relations they are embedded in, I make a distinction between independent players and 'stakees'. Independent players are those who act on their own account and at their own risk. Stakees are players who are involved in 'staking' – an arrangement in which a poker player is provided with a 'stake' (money), and in some cases with training, in exchange for a share of the winnings. Staking builds on one of the main obstacles to becoming a professional poker player – the financial investments needed. Typically, a poker player needs to invest money in order to participate in a poker game. I identified three ways for a player to get involved in the game. In the first case, the player covers the stake money from his or her own earnings or from other sources. For instance, some online poker rooms offer 'freerolls' which give the player free access to a poker game in which they can win

cash. I call these players 'independent players'. In the second case, one or more other persons pay a part of the stake money. This is often the case when the player wants to participate in an offline tournament and wants to cover his or her expenses including travel costs. In the third case, the stake money is fully paid by a third party. In the second and third case any profit is typically shared between the player and the 'staker' (the person who provides the money). However, in some cases a company sponsors the stake money in exchange for promoting their name. This chapter focuses on staking arrangements where the stake money is fully covered by a third party in exchange for a share of the winnings as this is what I came across during my interviews. (Holts and Surugiu, 2016)[26]

7.3 The daily life of professional online poker players

Although professional online poker players were working in isolation there were a lot of structural commonalities among them which were influenced by a complex interplay of external and internal factors. They had similar daily schedules, work activities and used the same range of strategies and tools. This section identifies the external factors that shaped the structure of professional players' work schedules, and explores their daily routines and work practices that they had in common despite being geographically isolated. This makes it possible to distinguish between professional and recreational players but also shed light on respective labour processes and learn about emerging occupational rules and players' professional identities.

7.3.1 Structure of working days

Most of the professional players I interviewed planned their days ahead, followed the same daily or weekly routine, divided their play time into sessions and took

[26] Portions of this chapter were published previously in shorter form in Holts, K. & Surugiu, R. (2016) 'It is on the Cards: Emerging Employment Relationships in Online Poker'. In*:* RANDLE, K. & WEBSTER, J. (eds.) *Virtual Workers and the Global Labour Market.* (2016). London: Palgrave Macmillan. Passages of this publication are presented here with the permission of the co-author Romina Surugiu.

regular breaks. It was the combination of these features that made it possible to distinguish their activity from recreational playing. Although a recreational player may also follow a similar daily routine it is rarely the result of a planning process, unlikely to be thought through the same way or to have the same regularity as professional players' schedules do. This section explores how professional players who work in isolation from each other structured their workdays. Firstly, it shows how they divided their working time into sessions. Secondly, it investigates their break patterns and compares the length of their workdays with the number of hours recreational players spent on playing poker.

Professional players divided their play time into sessions. The rationale behind playing at intervals was that playing poker, and in particular multi-tabling, demands high level of mental concentration. Short but intense sessions allowed a player to operate 'at their fullest capacity' as for instance Todor, a professional player from Bulgaria described:

I know that I have to play sessions to play poker. I developed it by sessions [...]. I don't sit on the computer and play six hours straight or ten hours straight. I usually don't play more than three hours in row because it takes me like [time] to track down the fish [recreational player] and to develop my game. It takes me between 30 and 40 minutes to do this. Then until [he probably meant 'during'] two hours and something I'm hundred per cent efficient. After that I start losing a little bit focus and a little bit concentration and I usually don't allow myself to play more than this. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

In contrast, a recreational player's day was less structured, if at all, and rarely divided into sessions. Professional players took time to prepare for a session meaning that they trained themselves or searched for optimal tables to play at before they started. For instance, an optimal table is a table with lots of casual players who are easier to play against than professionals.

Another 'sign of professionalism' was when a player consciously took breaks and planned them ahead. According to my respondents, only amateurs play without

pause. There were two types of work breaks: those imposed by poker companies, which I describe in the next section, and the ones that players defined themselves. The latter can be divided in regular and irregular breaks. Players took regular breaks in order to regain their focus and relax. These breaks were part of their daily or weekly schedules. For instance, Udo from Estonia explained the importance of such regular breaks:

Translated from Estonian: *It is important not to play for too long [he is referring to the duration of a playing session]. If you play for more than two hours – I have experienced it myself – then you may not notice but you get tired and your concentration declines. And if you are tired you start missing small details that are, however, very important.*[27] *(Udo, 31, Estonia)*

However, irregular breaks helped unwind if 'things go wrong'. Players took irregular breaks when they were having 'a bad run' which referred to persistent financial loss. These breaks helped them 'clear their minds', 'detach', regain control over their emotions and restart with a fresh mind as many of my respondents described. The objective of these breaks was to gain distance from poker and to do something entirely different as Morten described:

It's typical if you have what we call a 'downswing' [...] – if I started sort of losing for some reason. That was like ok, let's put poker aside for a couple of days [...]. Just to start fresh. Because if you get – if your mind gets affected of your losing – even if it is just bad luck, is like, there is always like that one card that can make you lose. And if you get affected by that [...] that's sort of [what] poker players call 'tilt'. You lose and you start playing bad. So it is better to just have a break, start fresh on, do something else, go on a vacation for a week, coach someone, get drunk whatever, do something else. (Morten, 37, Norway)

[27] Original text: Et (...) Ja kindlasti näiteks et sa ei mängi liiga kaua, et et kui sa mängid üle kahe tunni, et see, olen ise kogenud, et see tegelikult, sa võibolla isegi ei saa aru, et sa, et sa lihtsalt hakkad, et sa väsid, et su tähelepanu (..) nõrgeneb lihtsalt ja see on võibolla pisidetailid, mis tegelikult (.) on hästi olulised, need jäävad märkamata, kuna sa oled väsinud lihtsalt.

In addition to dividing workdays into sessions and taking breaks, some of my respondents believed that a professional player must work 'long' and 'hard' which some of them measured by the number of working hours:

You cannot play two, three hours a day and call yourself a poker player. It's too little. (Claudia, 22, Romania)

However, this alone was not enough to distinguish a professional from a recreational player. Most of my respondents indicated that they played a minimum of five days a week and between two and twelve hours a day regardless of whether they saw themselves as a professional or recreational player. It was the combination of the features discussed above that distinguishes a professional from a casual player.

My data also revealed that professional players can have more than one daily routine they alternate between or have had throughout their poker career. For instance, some players worked longer hours in the winter and shorter in the summer in order to save time for social activities with their friends. Others changed their routines when they experienced changes in their personal life or adapted to changes in the poker industry. The next section explores the external factors that the time structure of working days depends on.

7.3.2 The shaping of time structure

The time structure of a poker players' workday depends on a number of factors that can broadly be divided into three groups: time structures related to the poker industry, global time factors of the industry and other external constraints. In addition to these, the daily life of players was defined by a number of different economic, social and technological factors, by the relationship to their stakers and by self-imposed factors which are the topics of the following sections. This section explores the factors that had a direct impact on the times professional players worked or took breaks as described in the previous section.

The time structure related to poker industry refers to constraints that are imposed by online poker companies. For instance, there were different types of poker games that could be played online each of them having a different impact on players' daily schedule as Costin and Max described:

[...] the schedule for cash players is different [versus a tournament player] because he can play whatever [whenever] he wants, he can sit for like half an hour and he can close the cash tables and leave. But if you are gonna start playing tournaments, you're gonna sit like for twelve hours, even more, because you can't leave a tournament, you just started and some issues appear, you cannot just leave, you have to keep playing. You can't stop any time you want. (Costin, Romania)

I started to schedule my time, so I was like, okay, I wanna play from 4 till 8, take a one hour break, and then from 8 till 12, and then stop for today, and then basically I'd just stop registering [for online tournaments] when I knew, on average, the longest time a tournament could take is an hour, so I just stop registering an hour earlier, and then I was more or less done by the time I wanted to be done. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

Cash games can typically be played at any time of the day while tournaments can only be played at times fixed by poker companies. Additionally, some companies offer incentives to encourage people to play at certain times whether these are cash or tournament games. A higher price pool offered on Sundays was one such example as Morten fervidly explained:

That [Sunday] is the only day in the week when they [online poker players] really know which day it is. This is true because every other day just melts but Sunday is all the big online tournaments. All the big ones when they really can win like million euros in one tournament is always running on Sundays. They start at 6pm on Sundays and they keep on starting until midnight [He refers to starting times. The actual ending time of a tournament can extend to behind midnight]. So every poker player, online player at least is like Saturday is kind of slow, stay at home, so on and Sunday we play. That's like the big day. (Morten, 37, Norway)

Those who played tournament games also faced constraints with regard to their break times which were either defined by poker companies, or it was not possible for a player to take a break without experiencing financial loss. In both cases players' autonomy was limited, as Max's response illustrates:

And the bad part of that time [...] yeah, you didn't have breaks. So what this meant for me is usually I actually had a bottle where I was pissing into (laughs) [...] and yeah, it was quite brutal because like I couldn't really get up because especially if you have like 40 tables open I couldn't really like just stop at some point, like ok, now I wanna take a break. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

The second category refers to global time structures that the poker industry is embedded in. Most of the leading online platforms make it possible to compete against players from different world regions and time zones. However, if a player had a preference for playing with people from certain countries, it could influence the course of their day. Many of the European players I interviewed had a preference for playing against casual players from North America which meant adapting their working time to these time zones and playing late in the evening or during the night – the times when the highest number of casual players was online. In search of optimal opponents, many of my respondents adapted their work hours to a different time zone as for instance, Todor and Max described:

So I go to bed after 5, around 6 am [...] and I sleep till 1, 2 o'clock in the afternoon. [...] My mother calls me her American son because I live in Bulgaria but I'm in American time zone. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

I was trying to play with US time zones, so that when the US night hits that you start playing and you basically just try and play within those times because this was when most games were available. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

Other external constraints were related to players' educational or work commitments, and to their social environment. Those respondents who were in

paid employment or self-employed typically played after work. Some of them used all their free time to play poker as for instance Stanko from Bulgaria did:

I basically had 8 hours of sleep, 9 hours of work and the rest was playing poker. I came home from work and I started signing up to tournaments and play the whole night and then go to bed, sleep, go to work. And then rinse and repeat. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

However, some of the players who studied or went to school shifted their days around poker instead of adapting their poker work to their learning commitments. The immediate social environment also had an impact on the course of the players' day. Respondents who lived with a partner synchronised their schedules with their partner's working hours. Others synchronised their working times with their friends' schedules. Also family commitments had an impact on working hours, especially of those with small children.

For many of the players, the time structure related to the poker industry, global time factors and external constraints resulted in distinctive working rhythms that differed from the social norm. Many of the respondents described a 'going to bed late, waking up late' pattern that they had adopted:

So if you're doing well in a tournament you can't go to bed till it's finished. So if you're doing really well you might not go to bed till 4am. So it's not great for your sleeping habits. (Donovan, 32, Ireland)

When comparing independent players' work days with those of stakees, I discovered surprisingly few differences. Despite the fact that stakees were economically dependent, they were not significantly more restricted with regard to structuring their working days. Staked players spent more time on training by having regular training sessions with their coaches. At the same time, I also came across independent players who had regular training sessions. Stakees needed to meet targets they had agreed with their stakers. This could result in longer working days. Players who were involved in team arrangements experienced

additional constraints. Apart from these aspects, stakees were in fact like independent players when it came to the time structure of their workdays. The next section explores what players were doing during their working hours.

7.3.3 What are online poker players doing when they are at work?

In terms of the actual content of work or labouring practices, data showed that there were lots of similarities between professional online poker players. During their working hours, professionals either played poker, trained themselves or communicated with a mentor. All these activities included discussions about, the search for or the use of strategies and tools which could help improve the outcome of their work. While such discussions were almost absent in recreational players' talk, those who saw themselves as professionals spent a lot of time discussing their choice of strategies and relevant tools. These included practices such as overall time management, bankroll management, optimisation of play time through multi-tabling and a range of other specific tactics. I gained the impression that the discussion of strategies was part of the detailed demonstration of players' professionalism, and that it indicated the existence of 'tools of the trade' which is characteristic of many professional disciplines. The strategies and tools that my respondents described can broadly be divided into three groups: planning and structure, pace of work and tactics that aim at exploiting other players or bonuses offered by poker companies. Various digital tools exist that can be used in each of these areas.

In the area that involves planning and structure, time and bankroll management were the most popular strategies among my respondents. The first refers to the way players structured their work time and was discussed in the last two sections. The latter refers to the way players plan and keep finances in order. A Poker Wiki describes 'bankroll management' as a 'means to financial discipline' and points out that 'maintaining a bankroll is the best way to track your progress and limit your losses' (PokerWiki, 2015). Many of my respondents explained that bankroll management is a necessary strategy because it helps balance out losses

and reduce uncertainties. Stanko from Bulgaria called it 'risk management' and described it as a precondition for a successful poker career:

In order to actually (..) be a winning poker player, you need to have bankroll and bankroll management. What this means is basically if I have a 100 dollars, I'm not gonna put them all on the table because of just one hand of bad luck, I lose them all and I can't begin. I wanna put in 1 dollar and I only play with this 1 dollar. This is just an example, of course. This is risk management in a poker sense. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

When I asked Morten, a 37-year-old player from Norway what helped him become a professional player, he responded similarly:

Control your money. Poker players will call it like 'bankroll management'. And often we say if you're making your living out of playing tournaments you should never play for more than one per cent of what you have. So if you have a hundred thousand euros, never play, pay more than one thousand euros per tournament. Because then you can afford to lose [...]. If you play cash games we usually say never use more than five per cent of your money. (Morten, 37, Norway)

This type of control indicates that self-directed organisation of daily work activities was part of being a professional player. The use of time and bankroll management was not imposed by anyone. Players learned about it from other players or from their mentor but made the decision to apply it themselves.

Optimisation of play time, mostly through multi-tabling, was another popular strategy. All the professional players I interviewed played at more than one online poker table at the same time. They described this type of multi-tabling as a common practice among professionals. Most of my respondents played somewhere between four and sixteen tables in parallel. However, there were also more extreme cases such as Morten who played at 20-22 tables or Max who played at 30 tables in parallel:

I mean, at my peak times I was playing 30 tables, sometimes even 40 tables at a time, and I was basically very, very robotic and I realised I mean what I'm doing is very, I just follow a certain set of rules, and just rinse and repeat, over and over again, and this is creating me money... (Max, 29, Switzerland)

Multi-tabling is only possible in online poker and popular because it allows players to maximise their chances to win and balance out losses. Also the hourly rate is likely to be higher when playing at more than one table. Paul from France described that when he played eight hours a day at ten online tables, he would play 8,000 hands per day whereas in an offline casino he would only be able to play at one table at a time which results in around 27 hands in an hour and 216 hands in eight hours. Multi-tabling was also encouraged by the online poker industry through games that respondents called speed, rush, fast or turbo poker and described it as follows:

Speed poker or rush poker [...] it's cash game but you fold a hand and it puts you directly on another table. It's like this new thing. [...] You fold and it's like speed fold, speed fold, speed fold and you're getting directly the new hands (Boris, 25, Romania)

As already discussed in Chapter 6, this type of intense playing needed training and required a specific set of skills. Some of my respondents made use of digital tools to support their multi-tabling practice. For Max, who played at 30 tables, the use of supportive tools was even a necessity:

[...] if you don't have tools [...] I would say probably you can play 20 max. I mean, yeah, because it's a lot of extra clicking you gotta do when certain pop ups come up: resizing screens, or tables like moving them around and closing them. All this stuff takes away focus from what you wanna do, and this is things that you can automate and once you have this automated set you can play more tables. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

Although a number of my respondents complained about stress that this intensification of work caused, they imposed these practices themselves – similar

to bankroll and time management. This is different to traditional waged jobs where it is the employer who imposes practices that intensify the pace of work.

Other popular tactics that my respondents described can be grouped together under the name 'tricks'. These tactics aim at either exploiting online poker companies and their promotional offers or other players. On an everyday level this meant that players invested extra time in looking for promotional offers that they could use to their advantage or in observing and analysing other players. According to my respondents, a perfect opponent was a recreational player who was 'weak', 'emotional', 'makes mistakes' or 'plays badly'. In a professional's slang, such a player is called a 'fish':

Fish are players who don't know what they are doing. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

Players spent part of their working day on 'looking for' or 'tracking down the fish' as Todor vividly described:

We drag them [fish]. You sit on the table where they are and you play, you try to get involved in as much hands as you can in with them. So you can rob them because if you don't get involved some of the other regulars, the good players are called 'regulars', those are the players who do that [...] I don't expect him [a professional player] do stupid things and lose money but so I track fish. And it's going really good actually. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

There is a wealth of digital tools that support the 'fish finding' practice ranging from tools that help gather information about other players to websites that inform about someone's professional status as a player. The distinctive language that professional players used with regard to recreational players suggests that they may try to distance themselves from something that could be emotionally difficult, namely from the act of 'taking money from other people'. Calling other players 'fish' could possibly help dehumanise them and make it easier to play against them or 'rob their money' as Todor called it. The use of this type of

common language and slang words may also be a sign of a collective identity among professional players.

This section showed how professional players spent part of their work time on searching for, testing, improving and applying one or more strategies and tools that helped optimise the outcome of their work. This was considered as an activity that marked professionalism and distinguished them from recreational players. It is evident that the use of some of these practices was only possible thanks to digital technologies.

7.4 Control and autonomy

This section looks at control and autonomy among professional online poker players. It analyses the structuring factors of communities of practice, power relations between stakers and stakees, surveillance and monitoring, team dependency, implicit contracts, market forces and self-control. Although it explores the many differences between stakees and independent players it finds that they also have a lot in common.

7.4.1 Different dimensions of control and autonomy among stakees

I observed that stakees can have a different degree of autonomy depending on the type of arrangement they are involved in, their skills and experience. This section looks at the dimensions of control in staking arrangements. It explores how players' earnings, pace and quality of work were controlled by stakers, how team arrangements affected players' autonomy and how these were reinforced by implicit contracts.

7.4.1.1 Control of earnings

Professional players' earnings were first and foremost performance related: they depended on whether and how often a player won, for which, however, there was

no guarantee. Additionally, they depended on whether a player must share his or her winnings with any third parties. While independent players could keep all their winnings, players who were part of a staking agreement shared their winnings with one or more persons – with their staker(s) and with other players if they were part of a team. Earnings were also dependent on losses – an inevitable part of poker game – and on how the risk was distributed between parties. My data revealed that stakers wielded considerable power over players' remuneration. In order to shed light on the power relations in connection to players' earnings, the following four sections describe the different profit sharing systems, what they depended on, how the risk of financial loss was shared between parties and what systems existed to monitor players' financial movements.

7.4.1.1.1 Various profit-sharing arrangements

Data revealed that there was a complex profit-sharing system in place which can broadly be divided into 'fixed' and 'graduated' schemes. In fixed schemes, players received a share of profit that was agreed in advance and remained unchanged throughout the duration of an arrangement. In these arrangements, the percentage a player received often depended on his or her skills and experience. More experienced and skilled players received a higher share of the profit which, however, rarely exceeded 50 per cent of their winnings. Most of my respondents reported on players' shares that ranged between 20 and 50 per cent of their winnings. When a player was part of a team then the sum was divided amongst all team members meaning that he or she only received a fraction of the share as Andrei, a staker from Romania, described:

At the beginning, if the players are (..) students and they didn't have experience, you teach them and usually you get sixty per cent and the forty per cent it's splitted by all the students that you have. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

However, occasional 'friendship deals' and deals for 'exceptionally good players' existed where the players' share could exceed the 50 per cent mark as Costin explained:

There are few good, really good players that have a better per cent like 55 or 60 [...] but that's like on low limits and with really good players that [...] have high expectation and high win expectations. (Costin, Romania)

In graduated schemes, players' earnings varied depending on the type of the game they played and/or on how much money and time a staker 'invested' in them – all of which could change during an arrangement. Some of these changes were fixed in advance, others were negotiated during an agreement. My respondents reported on arrangements where players' shares either decreased or increased over time. For instance, Todor, a staked player from Bulgaria initially received 50 per cent but later 80 per cent of his winnings. He explained that he started receiving a higher share of profits when mutual benefit in the form of knowledge exchange developed between him and the staker. They were able to learn from each other by watching the other person play:

I play and now we divide 80, 20: 80 for me, 20 for him from all the profit. [...] when we started it was 50/50 [...] for example if I earned a hundred, a thousand euro - 500 for him, 500 for me. But because [...] he coached me a lot, we were talking, we were doing life sessions online, [...] we used 'teamviewer' and stuff like that. So he watched when I played, I watched him when he plays. So we learn different things. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

In contrast, Claudia from Romania reported on arrangements where players received 70 per cent of their winnings by playing low stake games. After graduating to playing high stake games their share decreased to 50 per cent of their winnings. The reasoning behind this was that high stake games are riskier – a staker can potentially lose a bigger amount of money. Although it seems that stakers took the biggest financial risk by investing their money in players, there were many strategies in place to protect them from this risk. The next section

explores how the risk of financial loss was distributed between players and stakers.

7.4.1.1.2 Distribution of risk between a player and staker

In all staking arrangements that my respondents described, except for one arrangement, the risk of financial loss was borne by players. Respondents described two scenarios for when a player would lose their staker's investment. Stakees were either required to play until they had recovered all the losses or stakers did not reclaim their money. However, the latter was only the case with one respondent who was sponsored by an online poker company in exchange for promoting their name and therefore not characteristic. The first was the most common scenario among the respondents but also the most disadvantageous for players, resulting in loss of earnings and in accumulation of debt. Stake money paid by a staker was in reality only an advance payment that a player needed to return when the agreement ended.

At times when professional players were losing at poker, they were not creating any income either for themselves or for their stakers. Yet stakers were in a stronger position because they could have more than one person 'working' for them and thus balance out the financial risk whereas stakees were typically tied to one agreement. A staker was also in a better situation because once players started winning, they were usually required to pay back the stake money before the profit sharing agreement applied. However, for players this meant loss of income not only during the time of their personal 'bad run in the game' but also during the time of recovery as for instance Andrei, a staker from Romania described:

If they [referring to players in staking arrangements] lose, they are going down, down, down… they will be 10,000 minus. I am the one who put the money and when they hit, they will play without anything till they win 10,000 [...] (Andrei, 33, Romania)

This response shows that stakers were aware of the unequal situation. Costin, another respondent from Romania, pointed out that the time with no income – he called it 'playing without anything' – was difficult for players. The situation was particularly critical when a player was embedded in a team that was playing tournament games. In this case, stakees only received income or could recover their debt when the entire team won (a tournament). At the same time the risk related to loss was shared between all the team players. I explore the team dynamics in Section 7.4.1.4. The severity of the situation for players and the awareness of it on the side of stakers could explain the support practice that Costin described:

You can have like a bad period of time like few months of losing and you don't have money for rent or for living and he [the staker] has to send you money for living because you are playing for them [...] So this is in his best interest to keep playing and to have everything sorted. So you don't have any issues with about rent or living or food or stuff like that because, yeah, sometimes it happens. (Costin, Romania)

The 'money for living' that Costin described could also be called 'survival money' – a contribution that players received in order to cover their basic needs such as food and housing expenses under the condition that they continued playing. However, data did not reveal how common this practice was. The respondent from Romania gave a hint that this practice depended on the amount of money a staker invests in a player, and that it was only common among 'big stakers' who 'have a lot of money and invest a lot of money in you'. The 'survival package' during the times of no income could also extend to other areas of life as Costin described:

They [stakers] are making sure that everything is ok in your life. So, if you have problems in your life, they will also (..) try to see if they can help you with something [...] let's say, money issue or I don't know problem issue like health issue, you know, family problems. They are always there to…I mean this is for big stakers, you know, that have a lot of money and invest a lot of money in you and have high expectation

from you. So they are trying to keep your balance in your life and to see that everything is OK with you. (Costin, Romania)

As these responses show, stakers were largely in control of players' financial situation and had delegated the risk of financial loss to stakees. However, in addition to the 'survival money' practice, data revealed that there were other practices that could improve stakees' situation. One of them was related to the debt that stakees accumulated when they lost. Some of the respondents were offered two options for clearing their debt: they could either continue playing until they had recovered their losses or end the agreement prematurely if they cleared their debt from other sources as for instance, Andrei from Romania described:

If for example, I am minus 10,000 and one of these three students [he is referring to players to whom he was giving money] is saying: 'Hey, I don't want to play anymore because it's a waste of time until I win 10,000!'. Ok, in this moment I ask him to give me his shares. [...] (Andrei, 33, Romania)

In the same response, Andrei also described the risk that he as a staker took. Stakers were at risk of losing their 'investment' if players could not clear their debt or commited a fraud:

If he [he is referring to a stakee] says: 'Fuck you, I don't give it [he is referring to stake money] to you!' that means I lose the money [...] but because I'm professional, everybody knows me. For sure he won't do this job anymore with anybody, in any team. So, this is his…he won't get any reference about...from me. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

Despite the dangers that stakers were exposed to, the interviews revealed that the risk of financial loss was unequally divided between players and stakers. Stakers delegated the risk to players and exercised control over their earnings. However, I also discovered practices that aimed at improving stakees' situation by giving them alternative options to clear their debt or financial support at times they

generated no income. The next section analyses how these different arrangements were negotiated between stakers and players and what they depended on.

7.4.1.1.3 Negotiation of terms

The terms of a staking agreement, in particular with regard to profit sharing and financial loss, were typically set by stakers on a case-by-case basis or defined in standardised contracts. In arrangements that were decided individually, the conditions largely depended on how much time and money stakers 'invested' or expected to 'invest' in players and/or on players' level of skills, their previous game experience, their estimated profitability and on the type of the game they played (whether for instance they played low or high stake games). An experienced player with the right set of skills was likely to be offered better conditions than an unskilled player. Claudia captured the essence of this when she said:

[...] if there are players that are very well prepared then the percentage [referring to players' share in profit] is higher for this [these] players. They get the higher profit because the coaches invest less hours in training them than in the other players. (Claudia, 22, Romania)

In the discourse about staking arrangements, respondents acknowledged the dominant role of stakers for instance by saying: 'it [referring to profit sharing arrangements] is set by the coaches', 'the stakers say...'. Stakees responses also suggested that they accepted the power imbalance because of stakers' better financial situation and better knowledge of the game, especially the knowledge about 'tools of the trade' as described previously. Staking offers were often linked to coaching – regular training sessions. This was an important motivation for some of the players to get involved in being staked because hiring a coach was costly. For these reasons, most of the respondents regarded staking as an opportunity despite the limited bargaining power they had or would have. However, my data also showed that players' bargaining power could increase

over time, especially in long-term arrangements. Experienced and 'profitable' players could put pressure on their stakers by 'threatening to leave' as for instance, Andrei described:

[...] if you are a big winner and you want to leave the staking and it is in his [referring to stakers] best interest to keep you because you are making good money, he can offer you a better deal or something different. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

In arrangements that were based on pre-defined contracts, players had no or very little bargaining power. In such arrangements, stakers defined the conditions and players applied for 'positions'. Whether or not someone was hired by a staker or a staking organisation depended largely on their poker experience, skills and trustworthiness or their potential to become a skilled player which players had to prove. They could prove it by providing stakers with a range of information which would include their poker history including graphs about their development as a player, game archives, profile names from online poker rooms they had played in the past, a description of their motivation and current activities. References from other players or previous stakers could also be crucial. (Holts and Surugiu, 2016) However, the more standardised an arrangement, the less possibilities there were for a negotiation as Claudia stated:

No, no, it [terms of an agreement] is set by the coaches. It is not negotiable. (Claudia, 22, Romania)

To sum up, players had limited or no possibilities to negotiate conditions that corresponded with their skills and experience. In most of the staking agreements stakers defined the conditions, often to the detriment of the stakees. The next section explores how stakers made sure that players complied with the conditions they set.

7.4.1.1.4 'He can see everything...' - the monitoring of players

The majority of players I interviewed undertook work at their homes including these who were in a staking arrangement. A few of the players did not even live in the same country as their stakers or had never met them in person. Despite the geographical distance stakers could monitor stakees' online activities including their financial movements and all the game activities. They typically had full access to players' online profiles, could monitor all the decisions they took and had a complete overview of all their losses and wins (Holts and Surugiu, 2016). This information was archived so that stakers could also access it retrospectively. Costin who had multiple roles in staking business, described his experience of being 'transparent' as a stakee:

I've always been transparent with him [the staker] [...]. He has database that you can update each day and tell him how much money you have in each account and everything. Everything is like very transparent and you can see how much money you made, how much money he made, how much money are you make up [owe the staker] and everything. (Costin, Romania)

This type of transparency and full access allowed stakers to ensure that a player complied with the conditions they had agreed on. There were a number of digital tools that stakers used for monitoring such as tracking software, digital databases to archive information, or tools which allowed remote access to players' computers. For instance, Costin listed a few of them:

There are tracking sites that see exactly what you played, exactly how much money you made and how much money you lost. There are also, on the big sites, there are playing audits. [...] in that audit you can see exactly what you played, how much you won. He [a staker] can see everything about your account, so...It's not about cheating, you cannot cheat. (Costin, Romania)

However, digital tools only served the purpose of gaining remote access to players' activities and were not the main instruments of control. It was rather the profit sharing arrangements, reporting structures and work targets that I

continue exploring in the sections below. My data also revealed that monitoring was generally accepted and well received by players. For instance, Todor recognised that he was being monitored but showed understanding for it:

We keep in touch almost every day [...] because he [the staker] wants me to keep him in touch how his investments are going. When I'm winning, when I'm losing, how I´m winning, how I'm losing because like every investment you need to keep an eye on it. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

It appears that control was perceived as 'doing something good' such as offering training and support. For Boris, as for many other stakees, being monitored was an exchange with mutual benefits whereby the staker trained them in exchange for having full access to their online activities:

I liked it [he is referring to being monitored]. I mean that was profitable for me because he [the staker] checked it and he helped me. (Boris, 25, Romania)

It was therefore not surprising that none of the respondents complained about being monitored. The rhetoric they used indicated satisfaction rather than exploitation. This suggests that the monitoring by using digital tools reinforces and eases control over players, in particular the control of their earnings.

7.4.1.2 Control of pace and quality of work

Control could be exercised in a number of different ways. In the previous sections, I showed how stakers exercised control over players' earnings. In addition to this, my interviews revealed that stakers exercised control over the pace of work and players' game activities. In terms of pace of work, respondents reported on two types of staking arrangements. There were arrangements with set work targets and open-ended agreements with no set targets. Depending on the terms, the first could have a considerable impact on intensity of work while in the latter players had more autonomy with regard to when and how often they worked. In

arrangements with set work targets, stakers defined the number of games or hands a player was required to play in a set period of time – for instance per month. However, this type of piece rate plan had an impact on the pace of work typically leading to long working hours as Mario experienced it:

It's a little bit hard to stay 12 hours, you know, in front of a computer and make your nerves. [...] because you have to play 15,000 hands until…for month, you know. [...] Per month, yeah. This is a lot. (Mario, 30, Romania)

There were also arrangements that defined the number of games that a player needed to play without specifying the time period. For instance, Claudia had bound herself to play 5,000 games before she could leave or renew the contract. In contrast to Mario, she could choose over what period of time she played the set number of games. It took her approximately five months to play 5,000 games. Such arrangements had no or little impact on pace of work but they affected players' ability to end the contract, according to Costin:

Some stakers are having a different contract like you have to play a certain amount of tournaments and only after that you can quit. Like you have to play a thousand tournaments and after that you can quit but you cannot quit earlier than that. (Costin, Romania)

In open-ended contracts without set work targets, players had more autonomy with regard to pace of work. However, they still had to pay back all the losses as described in the section above. This could increase the pressure to play long hours even in agreements with no set work targets.

In terms of controlling players' game activities, in typical staking agreements whether with or without set work targets, stakees were usually obliged and encouraged to report back on a weekly and in some cases on a daily basis. This was known as 'hand review' and involved discussions about their past games. Most of my respondents used Skype to talk to their stakers. For instance, Boris described his experience with regular reporting of his game activities:

We had sessions, Skype sessions where he [staker] reviewed my hands through this program. I sent him my daily hands, sent him for...into analyse it like he puts you in the database, puts my name in and he sees everything, what I've done and he tells me that 'You do this too often or you never do this. You should do this'. And (...) basically he (…) yeah, that's it. He plays, sometimes he played to show me and told me his thought process while he was playing. (Boris, 25, Romania)

However, it was not entirely clear to what degree there was an obligation for players to follow stakers' advice and what would happen if they did not. Costin who managed other staked players in addition to being a stakee himself described these sessions from his point of view (as a manager):

It's really hard when you are staking like players for a lot of tournaments [...] they don't know too much, you know. You have to give them a lot of coaching and to have them improve the game. They know the basics and they are saying they are good at poker but actually they are not. So, you have to work on their game. (Costin, Romania)

These regular discussions between stakers and stakees combined elements of training, managing and monitoring of players' activities and were comparable with a number of management practices in conventional organisations. They could also be seen as a form of quality control. However, stakees only pointed out the training side of 'hand reviews' by describing them with words such as 'training', 'advice', 'exchange of knowledge and ideas', 'coaching', 'help with the game' or 'assistance'. They considered the advice with regard to their game activities beneficial, educational and as a way to improve their skills rather than an attempt to manage or even control them (Holts and Surugiu, 2016). This was similar to the monitoring of their financial movements, as described in the previous sections, which was also accepted and well received by players and not seen as a way to control them.

7.4.1.3 Implicit contracts

A number of respondents reported being asked to sign or agree to a contract when entering a staking arrangement. I did not see any of those contracts but I learned that they regulated points such as termination, division of earnings and work targets. The same respondents pointed out that these were contracts with no legal value but based instead on reputation and trust. This meant that players who broke a contract risked losing their reputation in the wider poker community. For instance, under the Romanian legal system, a contract must have a special form in order to be legally valid (Holts and Surugiu, 2016). According to my Romanian respondents, the staking agreements did not have the required form. Costin, who was hired by a staker to manage the application process and to oversee the work of stakees, described it as follows:

There is a contract but is not official. It's just between the poker community. Only in the poker community…I mean, if you, if you are (..) if you have a reputation you know, you are never going to do something that is not in that contract, to do something bad to your reputation because you will never find another staker, and every poker community will just erase you and just tell you that you are a scammer or that you are a bad person, that you are a bad player and that's not something that…if you are doing it for a living, you are not gonna break that contract. (Costin, Romania)

Regardless of whether a stakee actually signed a document or not, most of them were bound to an implicit contract. Although stakers did not always state the penalties, players were at risk of losing their reputation in the wider poker community if they did not comply with both the explicit and implicit rules associated with staking. However, being part of a poker community was important for a number of reasons. It helped shape players' occupational identity but also be connected to other players and have access to game related knowledge. Informal contacts and references by recognised members of the community could be crucial for finding a staking opportunity. Whether a staker or a staking organisation hired a player depended largely on their trustworthiness which a player usually had to prove by providing the staker with references.

Therefore losing reputation in the poker community could mean losing the chance to work again as a stakee. For instance, Costin described what mattered in the recruitment of stakees:

Testing, talking with them, seeing the previous history like how much did they play in the past few years and the results of them and finding also players that you know that can vouch for them...that they can say good things about them like: 'He's a good guy, he will never cheat you, he will work hard' and everything like that. (Costin, Romania)

The players I interviewed worked for a single staker or a group of stakers at a time. Although their stakers had not explicitly banned them from working for someone else, they expected from players a full commitment to their 'investment' as for instance, Andrei, a staker, stated:

The money that you have, you need to take care about it as if is your last money. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

Also given the pressure and intensity of work that work targets and periods of financial loss can create it would have been difficult if not impossible for a player to work for more than one staker at the same time. Besides, as discussed previously, players' activities were visible to their stakers and to the wider poker community which would make it difficult to 'secretly' enter another staking arrangement.

Despite the absence of legally valid contracts, stakees were bound by rules that were reinforced through the context of poker community and by various surveillance practices. These means gave stakers considerable power over stakees' professional careers and their activities.

7.4.1.4 Team control

In addition to the dynamics between a single player and a staker or a group of stakers as described in previous sections, Andrei described a staking arrangement that involved a group of players who participated together in online tournaments. Such an arrangement reinforced team control and imposed additional restrictions on stakees' autonomy with regard to their earnings and working time.

For a staker, the benefit of maintaining a team was that players could work in shifts even though they presented themselves online as one single player. This was only possible online, where the person's real identity is not visible. According to Costin, who had participated as a stakee in a team, players choose to participate in such an arrangement because of the benefits of knowledge exchange with and the possibility to learn from other team members. In the case reported by Andrei, the staker was part of the team and took over the more 'critical' shifts – the final games of an online tournament. Participating in final games allowed him better control of the outcome of the tournament by bringing in his own game expertise and 'outsourcing' the parts of the game that he considered 'boring' (these were usually the games prior to final games in a tournament) to stakees. Andrei described the shift work in more detail:

So, if you are playing a [an online] tournament you don't know who is in front of the PC [personal computer]. So I play six hours, I call the professional [referring to the staker with more expertise]: 'Look, I'm in the money, take my computer and play it!' And he is playing. [...] he is fresh, he don't have six hours of playing. He sees the game different. All these players play with me six hours [...]. And these things it's a secret to be in the top three. [...] So, staking means to have a team, to show them how to play in these two parts, playing a lot and when they achieve here, you are going to your desk and play it, and win it. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

When players worked in a team their working time was determined by the person who organised the shifts. However, from Andrei's response it was not clear whether this was the staker or another team member. The working time was also restricted by tournament times which are defined by online poker companies as

described in Section 7.3.2. However, this applied equally to all the players who participated in tournaments whether they were independent players, stakees in a single player or in a team arrangement.

In team staking, players' earnings were dependent on their own performance and on the performance of other team members including their stakers'. This put a great pressure on each individual because there was only a limited number of people who could win a tournament. The profit-sharing scheme in a team arrangement was similar to staking arrangements with a single player with the only difference that the players' part had to be shared by all the stakees. The division of earnings between players was determined by the staker and dependent on different factors such as their game experience and skills but also on who won the most important parts of the game as Andrei described:

The one who win in that month will take more but the one who lose will also take money. [...] It's each part different deals depending of the players, depending of the experience of them. Maybe some players are much better than others, maybe it's a new student that are coming in the team [...] He will take less till he achieve to earn some money to be equal with the others. So, there are many, many, many, many things to be done. Many rules. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

Andrei also reported that the contract with each team member was based on trust and reputation, and that the risk of financial loss was borne by players. If the team lost, stakees would need to pay back the stake money However, the fact that the staker was part of the team created a paradoxical situation where in case of losses, stakees were working for free until they had recovered all the losses, including the losses of their staker. This put pressure on each member of the team and reinforced team control.

A team arrangement as described by Andrei had all the features of a staking arrangement with a single player plus it created peer group control. Players involved in a team arrangement were less autonomous compared to players who

were involved in single-player-staking. The next chapter explores constraints on players' autonomy that arose from outside a staking arrangement.

7.4.2 General constraints on the autonomy of players

In the previous sections, I described how players who were financed by another person experienced constraints that came from the relationship with them. It might be expected that players who act on their own account and at their own risk would be able to be more autonomous. However, data revealed that their scope for exercising individual autonomy was in practice constrained by the complex interplay between a number of different economic, social and technological factors such as the way the industry is organised, characteristics of the game, legislation, the immediate social environment or market forces. In fact these external factors limited the autonomy of both the stakees and independent players although they could affect them differently. The focus of this section is on assessing the degree of autonomy players had in the light of these external constraints.

Data showed that there was something contradictory about how players perceived their situation with regard to autonomy and the constraints that limited it. On the one hand, most of the respondents, in particular those who worked on their own account and at their own risk, praised the high degree of autonomy they strongly believed that they had compared to people in other professions. For many of them it was even the driving force behind exercising this profession (although typically their enthusiasm sank after a while, which is the topic of Chapter 8) as for instance Andrei's response illustrates:

I want to tell you that, that people who have this job, so the people who live from this [from online poker]. So that five to seven per cent of the market because the rest I don't count…I think it's like five to seven per cent, they have the most wonderful job in the world. I don't see any more wonderful job [...] because you are your own boss, you have your own money, you can afford to pay anything, to drink anything, to eat

anything, to travel where it's poker, and poker it's everywhere in the world. So, in the last ten years I see all Europe, I see the United States, I see South America only because of poker. So, you travel, you know a lot of people. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

On the other hand, this enthusiasm stood in contrast with the constraints on players' earnings, workplace and structure of their working days that many of the respondents described. For instance, Andrei's praise: 'you have your own money, you can afford to pay anything' contradicted his statement about lack of autonomy with regard to his earnings:

So, playing poker means that today maybe you lose 1,000 and tomorrow maybe you lose another 800 [...] When you are saying to somebody that you are losing 1,000, everybody will look at you, wow, I am working two months for this, how can you lose so much money? (Andrei, 33, Romania)

Similarly, Paul from France, described the external constraints on poker players' earnings:

[...] at the beginning it is really hard. You will have months you can lose 10,000, 20,000 when you are really good. And it's like, you just lose a brand new car. I have a friend of mine who can lose in a month a price of a house. They can lose 300,000 in one month. They have 2 million in their bank but still. That's a huge amount of money. That makes you crazy. When you are unlucky during one, two, three, four months, you can just become crazy. (Paul, 31, France)

Players' earnings could be affected by a range of external factors such as the characteristics of the game, national legislation, poker companies' policies and their strategies or more implicit market forces. For instance (as already stated previously), a player could only earn at the expense of other players plus there was a limited number of people who could win. Also countries' legislation with regard to taxes or any legal limitations with regard to gambling activities could have an impact on earnings as for instance Max stated:

One of the biggest problems you soon face once you do start making a bit of money is that the taxes that you would have to pay on it because in Switzerland at least you're treated as self-employed, and I think the tax rate is something like 40, or 43% or so on this. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

These tax laws often did not take into account losses and the money players had invested in the game. Geographical freedom or the perceived possibility to work in 'any country in the world' was another driving force for many of the professional players. However, similarly to earnings, there was a contradiction between how players perceived their autonomy with regard to their workplace and the constraints they pointed out at the same time. One the one hand, players emphasised that online poker gave them the freedom to work wherever they wanted, referring to this as being one of the reasons they chose this profession as for instance Udo from Estonia described:

Translated from Estonian*: In the case of poker, I think the reason I value the game is that it gives me geographical freedom. For instance, if I decided to leave Estonia and go somewhere else where, however, there is a language barrier that would make it difficult for me to work in that country. Consequently I could not work in a profession that required good local language skills. For instance, I could not go and work in Spain or Thailand. However, with [online] poker you can earn a living in any place. It does not depend on location. It rather depends on an Internet connection. Otherwise there is no difference.*[28] *(Udo, 31, Estonia)*

One the other hand, Udo pointed out that he could face legal constraints if he worked in another country. However, he was confident that he could 'circumvent'

[28] Original text: Ma arvan võibolla pokkeri puhul on see, et miks ma (..) miks ma ikkagi tunnen, et see mäng mulle oluline on, et ta on kuidagi (..) annab sulle siukese mobiilse vabaduse, et kui, kui peaks otsustama, et ma (.) tahan näiteks Eestist ära minna, et ma (.) ma ei soovi enam Eestis elada ja minna kuskile, kuskile mingi keskkonda, kus on (.) keel on, mis ma peaks õppima, et sa ei saa teha, ütleme mingit tavatööd. [...] Jah, et sa ei saa teha mingit tööd, mis nõuab sult head keeleoskust võib-olla mingit kohalikku, Hispaaniasse et, (.) et sa saaksid elada, noh, niimoodi, või Tai näiteks [...] Et sa saad nagu selle pokkeriga teha igal pool endale nagu, noh, elatist teenida, et see ei sõltu nagu asukohast, et pigem sõltub nagu, noh, et kas on olemas internet näiteks ja. Ja siis nagu praktiliselt vahet ei ole.

such restrictions. Todor, another respondent, gave an example of how players from the United States responded to the legal ban on online poker by migrating to neighbouring countries:

When they closed everything for Americans, the good American players run off to Canada so they can play online. They sign to like Canadian players so they can play online. So…(..) the best American players run to Canada [...]. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

I found a similar contradictory pattern with regard to the structure of working days. Professional players pointed out that in online poker they had the freedom to structure their days the way they wanted. At the same time they described a range of factors that limited this freedom. I analysed these limitations in Section 7.3.2.

A possible explanation for the contradiction is that players assess their individual autonomy based on their believed 'possibilities' to overcome the restrictions rather than on the actual situation or they may not perceive these as constraints. Many of the respondents talked about the importance of 'working hard', 'tricks' and 'strategies' in reaching their professional goals. Although external constraints affected both the stakees and independent players it was clear that independent players had significantly more scope for independent decision-making and modeling their responses than players in staking arrangements. The next section looks at how players internalised the external constraints described in this section and the importance of self-control as a way to cope with these restrictions.

7.4.3 Conflicting relations of autonomy and control

As shown in the previous sections, professional online poker players had to operate within a whole range of constraints such as control that is exercised by stakers and restrictions that develop from a number of economic, social and technological factors. Although most of the respondents did not feel restricted in their autonomy, they believed that in order to succeed as a professional they had

to work on the self, manage themselves: be disciplined, able to motivate themselves and manage their time, finances and emotions. This gave them the feeling of being in control of the outcome of their work and a sense of professionalism as for instance Stanko described:

[...] it is very important that to be a professional poker player, you need to have discipline [...] if you don't have the discipline you can lose it all. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

In Chapter 6, I already described practices of self-management as an attribute that helps create the 'right' image of a professional player, and that is linked to occupational identity. However, respondents also described it as an attribute without which a player cannot 'survive' as a professional. They were convinced that being able to control one's emotions, and the ability to work 'hard' and independently helps a player to 'survive' in their profession both emotionally and financially. For instance, Boris emphasised the importance of emotion management as one facet of self-management:

You start, I mean, people who are winning studied a lot and worked a lot on their game to get there. And there's a psychological part to it too. Like it's not enough if you play well. You have to control your feelings. (Boris, 25, Romania)

The contradictory discourse about autonomy, external constraints and the importance of self-management suggests that there is a complex interplay between these factors. On the one hand, respondents were convinced that professional players needed to be and could be in control of the labour process and autonomous but in reality external factors (as discussed in this chapter) limited it. On the other hand, the way players responded to these external constraints also limited their autonomy because they were controlling themselves. It is clear that because of the way they disciplined themselves they could not be entirely autonomous. In case of stakees, some of the discipline was imposed by stakers or by other team members. However, most of it was imposed by players themselves.

This suggests that there is an interplay between players' autonomy, external and internal control. Players' activities were restricted by external factors such as control exercised by stakers or restrictions coming from economic, social and technological factors but they internalised these by developing internal control mechanisms such as self-discipline and emotion management. Professional players internalised external control regardless of where it came from. Consequently self-management and self-control became an aspect of players' autonomy. This may also explain the contradiction between the degree of autonomy players believed that they had and the constraints that they described at the same time. Another aspect of their contradictory talk about autonomy and external constraints was that professional players may not have been aware that self-management practices were helping them cope with external restrictions. They may have performed them according to professional norms that they had adapted and that they thought they were expected to follow if they wanted to be professional players.

7.5 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the labouring practices of geographically isolated online players and explored the factors that shaped and structured their work. It has found that despite the isolation there were lots of similarities among professional players with regard to the way they organised their work. They planned their days ahead, followed the same daily or weekly routine, divided their play time into sessions, took regular breaks, managed their finances, played at multiple tables. Although professional poker is formally not recognised as work or a profession, I have found evidence of emerging norms that were communicated through individual and informal groups of players. Many of the professionals organised their daily work activities in ways they had learned from other players.

The chapter has also analysed the relations of autonomy and control among independent professional players and stakees who were financed by another

person. It has found that although professional players did not feel restricted in their autonomy, external and self-imposed factors limited it. At one extreme, there were stakees who were subjected to explicit forms of external discipline by stakers and at the other end, there were independent players who appeared to be highly autonomous. However a number of external factors meant that all of them had to operate within a range of constraints over which they had little personal control. The structure of their working days was limited by structures related to the poker industry, global time factors of the industry but also by personal commitments and their social environment. These restrictions applied similarly to stakees and independent players. Another set of constraints came from the relationship between stakers and stakees and most notably through a range of management practices and forms of monitoring and surveillance which structured players' earnings and the pace, quality and content of their work. The power relation between stakers and stakees was reinforced through the broader context of communities of practice.

The implicit nature of many of these forms of control made the practices of self-management critically important. Although players felt autonomous they appeared to have internalised external control and constraints. This meant that they were highly self-disciplined in terms of time management, emotional self-management and self-motivation. Self-management was important to stakees and absolutely critical for independent players. It was evident that players' apparent autonomy was underpinned by forms of self-management resulting from external restrictions and power relations with stakers. This is in line with the argument about conflicting relations of autonomy as a component in the production of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity (see e.g. Marques, 2017) as discussed previously.

Chapter 8: Sustainability of Online Poker as a Career: the Reasons for Leaving

8.1 Introduction

In Chapter 5, I introduced the three-stage model of the trajectory of a professional online poker player and described briefly the post-professional stage that I am focusing on in this chapter. This last stage in the model refers to trajectories of people who have ceased playing poker for a living. Many of the former professional players had become entrepreneurs or started working as employees either in a poker or a non-poker-related business. In this chapter, I explore what this reveals about the long-term sustainability of online poker as a career.

8.2 Career trajectories of former professionals

In reference to the three-stage model, out of the 32 players I interviewed, eight could clearly be identified as having entered the post-professional poker phase at the time of the interview. Another six were more difficult to classify. They had either tried to start a new career and failed, were still transitioning to a post-professional stage, or had started another professional activity in parallel to their poker career. The entry into the last poker phase was not as clearly defined as the entry into the professional poker phase. For most of the leavers, poker continued to play a role in their life either as a leisure or part-time professional activity, thus making the transition less clear-cut.

Out of those who could clearly be identified as leavers, five were previously full-time and three had been part-time players. More than half of the leavers (six respondents) had opened their own company of whom four were in poker-related and two in a not poker-related business. The remaining two respondents were working as employees in a poker-related company. Overall, half of these eight

respondents continued working in the poker industry and the other half chose a different industry. As already stated previously, the average age of these former players was 33 years at the time of the interview which is slightly higher than the average age of those respondents who were in the professional poker phase (29 years old).

A similarly diverse picture emerged of those six respondents who could not clearly be identified as leavers but shared some of their characteristics. Five of them were or had been involved in their own business and one worked as an employee. One of the entrepreneurial players was transitioning from full-time professional poker to running a poker-related business. I interviewed him in the early days of his business when he had not yet given up professional poker but was planning to. Another player had quit poker during the (part-time) professional phase and was only thinking of opening a business. One more player had tried to start his own business but gave up and continued playing poker for a living. Two players had opened their own business but also continued playing poker professionally. Only one of the six players was working as an employee in a not poker-related company. The average age of the 14 respondents who could in one way or another be associated with the post-professional phase was 32. Table 8.1 summarises the different trajectories. It shows that there was a clear tendency towards working in a poker-related business and working as an entrepreneur after leaving professional poker.

Table 8.1: Career trajectories of former professional online poker players

	employee or entrepreneur/ in a poker-related business or not	**Number of respondents**
post-professional players (those who could clearly be identified as such)	opened a poker-related company	4 (3 of those players were full-time and 1 part-time professional before entering this stage)
	opened a not poker-related company	2 (one was part-time and the other full-time professional player before)
	employee in a poker-related company	2 (one was part-time and the other full-time professional player before)

	Total: 8	
post-professional players (those who shared some characteristics of a post-professional player)	had tried, had opened, were planning to or were about to open a poker-related business	5 (one was part-time and the other four full-time professional players)
	employee in a not poker-related company and continued playing poker professionally	1 (he was a full-time professional player before)
	Total: 6	

Source: Author (based on players' descriptions of their activities)

Respondents described both positive and negative aspects of playing online poker for a living. On the one hand, many of them were passionate about the game and described the positive aspects. On the other, they pointed out a number of difficulties they faced. Many of them had recognised that they either needed to change their career or look for a parallel activity because it proved not to be a sustainable long-term career option as for instance Max described:

It [online poker] is not something that's gonna make you happy in the long run, and I think, this is why a lot of people that do play poker, I mean, I've seen multiple pros say this and state this - you need something else to keep you happy. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

However, some of the players found it difficult to change their career or do something different to poker because they had built up their social network consisting of other players and had become recognised members of the poker community. This may explain the tendency towards staying in the poker industry either as self-employed or an employee. Those who wanted to leave professional poker found themselves in a difficult position to make this decision. It was very clear that for many of the respondents the balance between positive and negative sides of professional online poker career was a very fine one as for instance Katariina explained:

Translated from Estonian: *When you have dedicated five years of your life to poker then it is very difficult to change the direction and have the same type of passion for another activity. You find yourself a bit 'trapped' even though you chose this activity. There are not many options for a career change.*[29] *(Katariina, 39, Estonia)*

In this chapter, I look at people who have chosen to leave professional online poker. I explore their reasons for leaving, their new activities, as well as their ongoing connection to poker. I also include those players in my analysis who have found a parallel activity or have tried to change their career but failed as I believe this also gives valuable insights into the downsides of online poker as a career option and possibly on the impact of self-management practices on the quality of their daily life. In addition to this, I dedicate Section 8.5.2 to exploring the dreams and future plans of those players who were in the professional poker phase at the time of the interview.

8.3 Reasons for leaving professional poker

The reasons for leaving professional online poker can be clustered into three groups. The first group refers to irregular, insecure earnings that drove players to look for alternative sources of income. The second refers to working conditions that created physical and mental exhaustion. The third is linked to the impact that the psycho-physical stress, long and unsocial working hours had on players' private life. For all these reasons, those who had left found that online poker as a job was not suitable in the longer term. The following three sections give insights into the downside of poker and its sustainability as a career.

8.3.1 Insecure income

Most of the current or former professional players I interviewed believed that in principle they could be in control of their earnings or at least reduce the

[29] Original text: Ja kui sa oled sellele juba pühendanud 5 aastat oma elust siis on jälle väga raske võtta uus suund ja hakata sellele sama kirglikult pühenduma. Et sa oled natuke nagu "trapped" ka kui sa nagu oled selle tee valinud. Sest ega sealt nagu väga palju sellist kerget karjäärimuutuse võimalust ei ole.

unpredictability of their income. They emphasised that earnings from online poker were largely dependent on skills, the number of hours they invested in developing skills and on their discipline. Nevertheless they reported their struggle with irregular, inadequate levels of earning and financial loss. Those who had left because of insecure income believed that they did not 'work hard enough' in the highly competitive environment and/or that they did not have the required skills. Most of them were either not willing to or could not work 'harder' because of other obligations in their life such as childcare or another employment. For instance, Katariina who cared for three children was 'not able' to work more:

Translated from Estonian: *I just discovered that I am not able to work that much. There are so many angry young men who invest lots of time in learning and play for 10 hours a day. I just cannot keep up with them and I just gave up on it.*[30] *(Katariina, 39, Estonia)*

However, it was not entirely clear whether 'working hard', 'more', 'that much' or 'being able to keep up' meant working more hours, working in a more focussed way, or both. Those who believed that they lacked the necessary skills did similarly either not have the resources needed for training or lacked motivation. For instance, Stojan realised that he lacked the skills but found it difficult to access training resources and to motivate himself:

I realised that poker…I wasn't feeling. [...] I realised I was starting to see that poker player is not something I could do all my life. [...] You can't beat against the whole world. Even I thought the game was very soft, I wasn't progressing fast enough. So…it was more and more difficult for me to make money. I started to realise that how bad I am. Because in the beginning, you know like every beginner he thinks he is the best [...] And so this was the time when I realised how much I have to learn that I am not progressing. And there are [...] so many more better players than me. (Stojan, 40, Bulgaria)

[30] Original text: Tead ma avastasin, et ma ikkagi ei suuda nii palju tööd teha. Et noored vihased mehed tulevad peale ja (giggle) ja tuubivad ja õpivad ja mängivad 10 tundi päevas ja ma ei jaksa nendega sammu pidada ja ma kuidagi lõin käega.

Although the professional players I interviewed believed they could influence the outcome of the game, paradoxically they also pointed out that in poker, loss is inevitable. They explained that even a professional player cannot always avoid it but must be able to cope with it – this is what distinguished them from a casual player. At the beginning, players had big hopes, dreamed of 'making a big win' and ignored financial insecurities. The annoyance with financial loss and insecure income typically emerged later when the passion for the game was diminishing. They realised that their earnings were insecure, irregular or that the financial loss was emotionally difficult to cope with. A few of my respondents also became aware of their difficulties accessing services such as health care or getting a bank loan because of the informal character of their earnings.

It was the prospect of winning money that drove people into professional poker and the fear of and annoyance with financial loss, and the insecure income that drove them out of it. When they first decided to become professionals the former outweighed the latter. As a response to insecure income, some of the respondents began looking for another source of income as a 'backup' or building a new career as a 'way out' of online poker.

8.3.2 Physical and mental exhaustion

A number of respondents reported that when they first started playing poker professionally, it was an intellectually stimulating and interesting activity that nourished their hopes and dreams. They were passionate and curious about the game. However, after a period of time their perception changed. They found it 'harder than they thought' and 'very boring, dull, monotonous' as for instance, Sorin from Romania reported. Many of the experienced players and leavers described it as a monotonous, repetitive, robotic type of work that is exhausting for body and mind. One respondent compared professional poker with factory work:

[...] you kind of hit the saturation in the game, where you're just like, okay, I mean, yeah, I'm here, so I probably won't get any further, and once you kind of hit this level, it turns into this like repeating job that you just do over and over again, and it's no different from staying in a, being in a factory, and just like moving box A from point A to point B, it's just like, okay. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

There were various reasons for this type of exhaustion. On the one hand, it was the 'monotonous clicking', playing at parallel tables by using several computer screens, quick and repetitive decision-making, long hours spent in front of a computer that led to physical exhaustion. This suggests that the stress was to do with the stress of earning a living out of online poker rather than with poker per se. The pressure and intensity of the game affected players' body and mind. Stanko's response illustrates the saturation that professional players reached:

Now I play much more rarely. Online not so much because honestly speaking just sitting in front of the computer and starting poker software just makes me sick. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

Some of the respondents feared that they might not be able to do it on a long-term basis as they might not be mentally and physically fit 'all their life'. However, knowing that it was an activity limited in time further increased the intensity of work as players felt pressured to make the best use of their limited time:

I'm not gonna be mentally stable for all my life like that because it's a huge pressure [...] So my goal is to make like [...] I have put the goal to make a thousand [he meant 100,000 dollars] till the end of this year. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

On the other hand, the unpredictability of income and worry about the future created additional stress. Many respondents were worried about their financial situation and felt mentally exhausted and dissatisfied:

[...] once you've been playing poker for a while, and that's your revenue, you become concerned [...] it's a little bit stressful, unless [...] you made a million or something

which is not really gonna happen. It does not happen that much. You are concerned that it's not gonna work forever that well, especially as the downturn for the poker industry happened. You are concerned that maybe next year there's gonna be very little fish. Maybe [...] instead of making a thousand euros per month or two thousand euros per month, you're gonna make half of that or how are you going to handle that? And I think that's a little bit of an implicit stress... (Adrian, 28, Romania)

As a result of these psycho-physical risks, some respondents had already left or were planning to leave professional poker. They hoped to regain their passion for poker or 'enjoy the game again' by switching back to recreational playing. Whatever they did next, most of them continued playing poker as hobby players.

8.3.3 Negative influence on work-life balance

Long working days, intensity of work and unpredictability of earnings as described in the previous sections did not only affect players' body and mind but also invaded their private life. Although (as described in Chapter 7) the professional players I interviewed emphasised the importance of breaks and fixed working hours, for some of them the reality looked different. This became apparent in the discourse about negative aspects of poker. To be able to make a living players felt pressured to work long hours, often late in the evening and at night (in Chapter 7, I described the external factors that define the working hours). Thus the 'ideal' image of a professional or behaviour that players thought was expected from them did not always match the reality. Adrian who had decided to give up professional poker mainly because of long working hours captured the essence of it:

I think the largest downside is that it takes a lot of time, it eats a lot of time, not only from the moment you play poker but also from the next day, and from the day after that because if you're gonna play from nine to five, 9 pm. to 5 am., you're not only gonna be beat the next day, but before you can get back into a normal sleeping schedule, the day after as well…and perhaps, yeah, you're a little bit torn about that so [...]. So I play from time to time in the casino but I'm doing mostly recreationally

and I moved away from that. Basically, for me, because it was taking too much of my time, too much of my productive time, not only during play but also the days after. (Adrian, 28, Romania)

He described professional poker as an activity that 'takes over one's life' and blurs the boundaries between work, sleep and social life causing 'implicit stress':

And I think that's a little bit of an implicit stress, and also it's playing online poker in particular it's kind of mends [he was not a native speaker and may have wanted to say 'messes'] with your life. You play it whenever you have a chance, if you're taking a vacation at the seaside then you have your laptop with you, you spot a good spot, then you play then there you're making it. (Adrian, 28, Romania)

Data revealed that there were several ways in which professional playing affected players' life outside of their work. Firstly, long and unsocial working hours had a negative impact on players' social life. Respondents reported that they had little or no time left for social activities with their friends. For instance, Morten, an experienced player, described a typical situation:

So the social life sort of disappears [...]. So a lot of players play hours and hours and hours. They get sort of maybe depressed is the wrong word but (...) they lose their social network. So that they are sort of alone. That's a big challenge. (Morten, 37, Norway)

Secondly, some of the players reported that poker consumed part of their sleep time which affected their health and made it particularly difficult to have a functioning partnership unless the partner was also a professional player, or to start a family as for instance Costin explained:

And you are going to play until like three or four o'clock in the morning [...] That's why it's hard to make a family when you are going to play professionally. (Costin, Romania)

Thirdly, many of the players felt that the emotional stress caused by different factors such as the unpredictability of the game, intensity of work and financial loss was in fact difficult to handle and affected the way they behaved and their relationships with other people. Even if they were able to control their emotions during their working hours, they could not always control them outside of these as for instance, Todor and Boris described:

I have my rage moments if you like to say that. That I'm smashing [he is referring to being violent] at home and stuff like that which need really control. You don't have let emotions take any part of your poker career. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

[...] when I lose [...] it affects me and this is what I have to work on. It affects the people around me [...] when I have this periods when you lose constantly, you are moody, you know and it shouldn't...I have to really, this is what I have to work on…losing shouldn't affect my state of being and affect…and I shouldn't affect the others around me, you know. This is what I have to work… this is what I have to work on, basically. (Boris, 25, Romania)

On the positive side, most of my respondents valued, especially when they first entered professional poker, the possibility to work from home and flexibility of their working time. They often only became aware of the insecure income, boundaryless working life and the psycho-physical risks later. When the negative influence on work-life balance outweighed the positives, they decided to give up on professional poker. The next section explores their life after poker work.

8.4 Life after poker

As Table 8.1 shows, more than half of the respondents who had left professional poker earned their livelihood as entrepreneurs, the majority of them in the poker industry. This section explores the reasons for the popularity of opening a poker-related business among professional online poker players. Firstly, it investigates the role that professional poker plays in the process of becoming an entrepreneur. It asks whether online poker could be a stepping-stone into entrepreneurship.

Secondly, it explores the reasons for staying in the poker industry whether as an employee or an entrepreneur.

8.4.1 Is online poker a stepping-stone into entrepreneurship?

Becoming an entrepreneur was the most popular choice among those respondents who had left professional poker. Six out of eight players who could clearly be identified as leavers started their own business and an additional five had either tried and failed, were planning to or were about to start a business at the time of the interview. Thus there was a clear tendency towards working as an entrepreneur after giving up professional poker. I identified two types of post-professional entrepreneurs. One type of player had always dreamed of opening a business or had been involved in entrepreneurship prior to their poker career. They described themselves as entrepreneurs at heart. Involvement with professional poker helped them implement their dream. For the second type of player, the idea of starting a business emerged during their poker time partly as a response to the negatives that I described in the previous sections. In both cases, playing poker professionally helped them to start a career as an entrepreneur either because it provided them with the right set of skills and/ or with finances. Many of the ex-players believed that their poker experience helped them to become a 'better' entrepreneur as for instance Adrian's response illustrates:

[...] I think the experience with poker really helps me and I think it would help anyone in making better business choices and being a better business person. (Adrian, 28, Romania)

The skills that they pointed out as useful for their career as entrepreneurs included the ability to work independently, self-management, logical thinking, self-control, risk-taking and the ability to 'read' other people. On a more practical level, some of the respondents pointed to the knowledge about how to manage their finances as particularly valuable for their business.

With regard to finances, some of the leavers used their poker winnings to open a company. Without these finances they could not have launched their businesses, as was the case for Morten. He was a successful player and had managed to save up money that he invested in a company:

I was a restaurant manager [...] then I started playing [poker] and then I quit my job, [...] played full time and then I invested my money in another company. (Morten, 37, Norway)

For others, the earnings from online poker served as a 'financial cushion' at the beginning of their new career. It provided them with flexible income until their newly launched business started producing a profit. For instance, for Adrian, who was a part time professional player, it gave the confidence to abandon his formal employment and to dedicate himself fully to his career as an entrepreneur:

The money [he is referring to his earnings from online poker] was also very good, very useful during those times. I was making…actually, it helped me get the confidence to [...] abandon my employer and pick up entrepreneurship because I felt I had a financial cushion to work with that. (Adrian, 28, Romania)

Although playing poker professionally required the ability to take risks, financial investments, and self-management – skills that are associated with entrepreneurs (Caird, 1990, Down, 2010) – there was no straightforward answer to the question whether online poker is a stepping-stone into entrepreneurship. It depended on several factors such as players' previous entrepreneurial activities, skills they acquired before their professional poker career and on the level of success or disappointment with poker that drove them to look for alternatives. In some cases online poker helped a person who already had entrepreneurial skills and mindset make the first step. In other cases, it paved the way for entrepreneurship more indirectly by teaching a player how to self-manage and be autonomous. After developing habits of autonomy, some interviewees reported that it was harder for them to do a regular job that involved working for another person and taking orders. For these players, becoming an entrepreneur was an obvious choice partly

because of lack of alternatives and partly thanks to the newly learned skills. The next section explores why the majority of these entrepreneurs decided to stay in the poker industry.

8.4.2 Is online poker an ongoing career path?

The majority of the leavers made an entrepreneurial career within the poker industry. Also two of the three players who started working as an employee did so in a poker-related company. Four out of six players who became entrepreneurs opened a business that was related to poker and an additional five who had either tried and failed, were planning to or were about to open a business at the time of the interview did so in the poker industry. My data revealed three types of poker-related businesses. Respondents had either launched a staking business, opened an affiliate online poker site or a company that dealt with promotion, communication or networking in relation to poker. One player opened a brick and mortar casino in addition to his online poker business. The rest of the players moved into different industries.

Those respondents who continued their professional career in the poker industry did so for different reasons. Many of them pointed out their close ties to the poker community and/ or social life they had built around poker that they felt connected to, their knowledge of the game and tools of the trade of poker as a profession that they were proud of. An activity in the poker industry allowed them to stay connected to their friends and the community and use their networks to their advantage as for instance Max explained:

One of the good things is obviously for me being in the industry for 5 years and being a professional player, I basically know the industry, and I know all the companies. I know most of the players, or, a lot of players. Yeah, it was just a good fit. I mean, obviously I could have done the same thing my company does in, I don't know, let's say basketball, but since it is poker I kind of knew the entire environment, and there were a lot of like connections that immediately spun up that I didn't really have to do anything for. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

They could also continue using their specialist knowledge for which they had 'worked hard' and that gave them a comparative advantage over non-players. For instance, Max pointed out the knowledge of poker slang as a precondition for a successful career in the poker industry:

The poker market is a very special one because the poker language is very distinct from any other language. I mean, to talk and report about poker you need a certain language, a certain skill set and a general marketing company, if they wanna do the same - let's say, run a Twitter account, for Poker Stars, I'm just making up something - they can't do that. They have [...] like zero shot because they're gonna write the wrong names or write the wrong things. People that speak and breathe poker are just gonna look at this and will be like, what is this? So you really need somebody that speaks the language, that knows the industry. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

A few respondents reported that knowing the industry made it easier for them to develop an idea for an enterprise. For instance, Andrei described how his professional poker experience inspired him to continue as an entrepreneur:

My wish was to open an online poker site - that was my target when I was a player. [...] Because I saw this game like [...] addiction. It's an addiction that you can't quit. [...] when I begin to be professional and to live from this I was playing twelve hours and I realised that even if I was doing a vacation or I was with my family, I needed to 'smoke' poker, so…[...] I saw that this is an addiction and I was thinking that if I am like this, I need to do this with the other people. So if it's an addiction, the most money in the world are doing with addiction. So you can do a lot of money with sex, you can do a lot of money with drugs, you can do a lot of money with cigarettes, you can do a lot of money with alcohol. So these are the most good businesses in the world. (Andrei, 33, Romania)

The strong wish to stay connected to poker even if players realised that it was not a sustainable career option confirms the finding (see Chapter 6) about the ties to players' communities and work identities that these help form. Once they had

been accepted into the community and recognised as professional players, they might find it difficult to give these achievements up. This could be amplified where there was a lack of an alternative identity. For instance, Adrian's response suggested that this may be the case:

If you become very involved in this scheme, in playing professionally poker, you're gonna very much mingle your life around that. [...] you run the risk of getting distracted [...] from other opportunities. If you're a professional poker player for a while, you may find it very hard to change professions. (Adrian, 28, Romania)

The issue with regard to identity including a lack of a clear alternative identity may explain the tendency towards staying in the poker industry whether as a self-employed or an employee. More data would help understand how relevant identity is for staying in the poker industry. Those who stayed in the poker industry did so primarily because they wished to stay connected to poker, saw a comparative advantage and/ or lacked an alternative. Data has shown that for many respondents being a professional online poker player was not a long term career path.

In conclusion, there was not enough evidence for online poker being an ongoing career path. However, data revealed that being involved in professional poker can influence someone's professional career by making a person decide to stay in the poker industry and/ or become an entrepreneur. However, these choices depended on additional factors that cannot be analysed here.

8.5 Visions for the way forward

The following section investigates the impact a career change had on ex-players' life and the visions for the future of those who were still playing poker professionally at the time of the interview. The first section explores whether ex-professionals' lives improved after giving up professional poker and the second compares the hopes and dreams of (current) professionals with the trajectories of those who had left. By analysing players' dreams with regard to their poker career

and the life after, the section gives insights into the sustainability of online poker as a career option.

8.5.1 Reflections on ex-players' new activities

In general, professional players who had changed their career expressed satisfaction with their new activity. None of them regretted their decision of becoming an entrepreneur or an employee even if they happened to earn less than they did with online poker. Those respondents who had become entrepreneurs whether in a poker-related business or not, described their new activity as more 'fulfilling' or 'satisfying'. Max captured the essence of this when he said:

I was earning the same amount of money in both [as a professional poker player and as an entrepreneur]. Actually [...] I'm still making way more money in poker than when I would do to run my company right now – I don't even get a salary. But I still enjoy myself a lot more doing the work for my company than when I worked to play poker. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

The respondents who were in a formal employment relationship, appreciated above all the stability that their new activity gave them as for instance, Stanko explained:

Just having the job and the stability of the job was much better than you know playing poker. (Stanko, 28, Bulgaria)

Margus also described the positive changes he experienced after giving up professional poker and becoming an employee:

Translated from Estonian: *If I played poker now I would earn more every month but I feel that this period in my life where I play poker full-time is over. Therefore I started working and I think it was a good decision because now I have a fixed daily*

routine which I like. I need to wake up every morning and so on. My health has improved considerably and also everything else.[31] *(Margus, 25, Estonia)*

A secure income, an open-ended contract and a fixed daily schedule were the changes that my respondents appreciated the most. Even if a new activity did not change all the areas a player was previously dissatisfied with, many of them felt that they were doing something more 'normal' that was accepted by the society and that they could openly talk about. For instance, Stojan who had opened a poker affiliate site, felt more accepted:

And I loved my work by the way [...] I was doing something which made me feel (…) more normal, now I had the poker site. (Stojan, 40, Bulgaria)

The overall satisfaction with a new activity mirrors the level of dissatisfaction players had during their time as professional players. As a response to insecure income, psycho-physical risks and the negative influence on work-life balance, they had found an alternative activity that provided them with livelihood and typically increased the level of satisfaction and public recognition. However, most of the ex-professionals wished to stay connected to poker and regain their passion they believed to have lost during their professional poker time (I will explore the loss of enjoyment and its consequences in Section 8.6). In order to explore whether online poker has the potential for a long-term career, the next section investigates the hopes and dreams of those players who played poker professionally during the time of the interview.

8.5.2 Looking for a way out?

The majority of the respondents who were playing poker professionally at the time of the interview envisioned ending their professional poker career at some

[31] Original text: kui ma mängiksin praegu pokkerit ma teeniksin kindlasti rohkem igakuiselt aga lihtsalt mul...see eluetapp on ma arvan minu jaoks hetkel läbi kui ma pokkerit mängiks täiskohaga nii-öelda...läksingi tööle, mis on [...] Minuarust minu jaoks oli väga hea otsus kuna mul on nüüd igapäevaselt on mul nüüd kindel rutiin, mis mulle väga meeldib. Ma saan...pean ärkama hommikuti ja nii edasi. Tervis on kõvasti paremaks läinud ja kõik muu ka.

point in the future. I observed that they had dreams with regard to the time before and after giving up professional poker. For the time before, most of them dreamed of glory in the poker community and/ or winning a 'big' sum of money that would protect them financially as for instance Todor described:

Well, I hope that I made enough money to secure my life till then [...] I accept it [playing online poker for a living] as a sports like I'm a professional football player. They play like until they are 35, 37 for example because that's their prime years. Because of poker it's gonna be the same. I´m not gonna be mentally stable for all my life like that because it's a huge pressure on them. [...] I have put the goal to make a hundred thousand till the end of this year [...] A profit from poker for year. This is my first goal, my second goal is gonna be a million and I guess I want my first million till I'm 26. (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

Their responses gave the impression that the possibility of winning a bigger sum of money or the dream of it helped them psychologically deal with insecurities and other negative effects of professional poker as described at the beginning of the chapter. Such dreams motivated them to continue playing poker for a living despite the difficult work conditions. Horia's response illustrates how fixated some of the respondents were on their dream:

I would like to win, let's say Sunday Million from PokerStars [The Sunday Million is a weekly poker tournament] [...] If I can reach that goal, it would be enough for me, for online poker. I would not say that it's over, and I do not play but I would be very satisfied with myself if I win. It's like a jackpot [...] So, I would like to reach this goal, this is the goal I'm looking for in the next, let's say one or two years regarding online. (Horia, 33, Romania)

The dreams and plans that players had for the time after professional poker ranged from becoming an entrepreneur to starting a family or going on a round-the-world trip. Many of the plans resembled the trajectories of those who had already quit professional poker. For instance, Todor was planning to use the

money 'he hoped to win' from poker as an investment for an alternative source of income:

From there [after winning a million that he hoped for] I'm probably gonna start doing some investments with this million. So I have some income on regular basis. Probably buy an apartment [...] or something like that. I'm not quite sure yet. And from there continue pushing hard, hard as I can get so I make like, I don't know, 5, 10 millions and secure my life while I'm old. Like a professional sports player... (Todor, 22, Bulgaria)

Although many of the players chose poker work over another profession because of enjoyment and the 'possibility' to win a bigger sum of money, the dreams and hopes during the time before giving up professional poker did not seem to come true for the majority of them. This suggests that online poker lacks the potential for being a long-term career. However, most of my respondents stayed connected to online poker after giving up on playing it professionally. The next section investigates this ongoing connection to poker.

8.6 Play once, play forever - players stay in love with poker

As I described in Chapter 5, professional players typically start their journey as recreational players - a time full of passion and enjoyment as many of my respondents described. However, this passion seemed to diminish once they started earning a living out of poker. It may be the stress, regularity or routine of a day job that dominated the enjoyment they used to have as recreational players. Whatever the reason for loss, players typically wanted to regain their enjoyment and passion for the game as for instance, Max' response illustrates:

Well, in 10 years I expect [...] Maybe start again with travelling to locational tournaments, and then playing more for fun instead of for trying to win money because it changes the whole attitude if you can play a tournament for fun. I've played some smaller blind tournaments, basically drinking a beer and enjoying

myself, and that's a different experience because you're not necessarily playing to win, you're more playing to entertain yourself and then once you do win once in a while then it's even better. So that'd be nice. (Max, 29, Switzerland)

Some of the ex-professionals I interviewed regained their enjoyment by becoming entrepreneurs or employees in the poker industry, some of them by becoming hobby players, but others found themselves in a dilemma. For instance, Katariina who had left professional poker continued as a hobby player and stayed connected to the community through her work as a poker journalist:

Translated from Estonian: *I am where I wanted to be – for me, poker is a hobby again. [...] I would not like to stay away from poker. Also working as a poker journalist suits me well [...]. I would like to keep it as a hobby. I think that poker is the best as a hobby.*[32] *(Katariina, 39, Estonia)*

In addition, many of the respondents who played poker professionally at the time of the interview, dreamed of playing it only as a hobby as for instance Indrek explained:

Translated from Estonian: *My plan is to turn poker into a hobby again. I cannot imagine that I would still be able to play it professionally in 20 years. It is too intense.*[33] *(Indrek, 38, Estonia)*

However, some of the respondents found themselves in a dilemma over combining a livelihood with regaining their passion for the game. For instance, Boris described his dilemma with regard to the need to earn a living and the wish to become a hobby player:

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[32] Original text: Et ma juba olen seal maal, kus ma nagu selles pokkeri môttes tahan olla, et ta on mulle hobi. [...] Nii et ta on mul hobi aga..aga pokkerist ma nagu päris eemale ei taha jääda, et selles môttes see pokkeriajakirjaniku töö mulle väga sobib [...] Aga jah, et mina tahaks ka minna sinna suunas, et pokker jääb hobiks ja ma arvan, et ta ongi hobina kôige mônusam.

[33] Original text: No minu plaan ikkagi pigem on see, et ühel hetkel tahaks pokkeri hobiks muuta. Et ma ei kujuta päris täpselt ette, et ma suudaksin vôi jaksaksin enam 20 aasta pärast nii intensiivselt pokkerit mängida.

My goal exactly [...] if I could do one thousand dollars a month that would be more than enough for me to live. If I could do more than that, I probably would [...] invest it, invest the money and not stop playing poker but like put it back to a hobby, obviously. But, you know, it's…not everyone can do this and I don't know if I can. (Boris, 25, Romania)

What all these players had in common was the strong wish to regain their passion for poker and only play it for pleasure without the pressure to earn a living. In addition, many of them wanted to stay connected to their friends and to the poker community as I described in the section 'Is online poker an ongoing career path?'. Although having 'passion' for the game helped withstand routine, intensity and stress according to my respondents, the passion also slowly degraded under these work conditions. As a result, players found themselves in a circular process that started with and led to recreational playing. This suggests that professional playing may be a temporary stage sandwiched between periods of 'enjoyable' hobby playing rather than a sustainable career option.

8.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the post-professional poker stage in the trajectory of a professional online poker player. It has analysed players' reasons for leaving professional poker and their post-professional activities. It has included the responses of people who had left professional poker, as well as the future plans and dreams of those who were still playing it professionally at the time of the interview.

It has found that people in the post-professional poker stage had a complicated relationship to poker. They felt strongly connected to it but had realised that playing it professionally was not a sustainable long-term career. In the transition from stage I to stage II, players formed a professional identity and became part of the community of practice. They learned to be autonomous and acquired specialist knowledge of the game that they were proud of. They felt ambivalent

about leaving the world of professional poker behind because it was difficult for them to give up their identity as professional players, their friends they had met through poker and their (often) reputable position in the poker community.

However, after becoming professionals they lost their pleasure and passion for the game that they had as recreational players in stage I. Poker became an ordinary and stressful job that was mentally and physically exhausting. They also realised that their earnings were insecure and irregular which drove them to look for alternative sources of income. They had a strong wish to recreate the pleasure they used to have but realised that the only way to recreate it was to give up professional poker. They found themselves in a dilemma that some of them solved by giving up professional poker and resuming recreational playing and/ or finding a professional activity in the same industry, mostly as entrepreneurs. In the post-professional stage, more than half of the respondents were or dreamed of becoming entrepreneurs, many of them in the poker industry. Others worked as employees either in a poker or not a poker-related business. The majority of the ex-professionals continued playing poker as a hobby. My analyses has shown that playing poker professionally provided players with skills and in some cases with finances that helped start a career as an entrepreneur. The popularity of opening a poker-related business after giving up professional playing can be linked to the possibility to stay connected to poker, recreate the passion and the reuse of game-specific knowledge which makes it easier for ex-professionals to start a business in the poker industry than elsewhere. This chapter has shown that players put a considerable effort into planning their careers and employability. This combined with self-learning that I described previously, suggests that career self-management is another area of the self that professionals take care of.

Whether someone continued as an entrepreneur or employee, they all expressed satisfaction with their life after quitting professional poker. Their new activities provided them with more stability, their work-life balance and health improved as a response to reduced levels of stress. They gained a clear public professional identity that was formally recognised and accepted by the society. Those who

were in a formal employment relationship appreciated a secure income, an open-ended contract and a fixed daily schedule. These positive changes have shed light on several important downsides of being a professional online gambler.

The last four chapters have shown that poker players find themselves in a circular process in which professional poker is only a temporary stage between recreational playing rather than a long-term career option: in stage I, poker was a pleasurable activity, in stage II former hobby players developed their identity as professionals and became part of the community of practice, and in stage III many of them returned to recreational playing. The quest for autonomy which motivated players in the first place led to self-managing practices for which they had to pay a high personal cost, which in turn destroyed the pleasure they had originally gained from poker. In an attempt to resolve this paradox, they tried to return to the original 'state of innocence' in which poker did not have to provide them with a steady livelihood but could be played purely for pleasure. If professional online poker was to become a sustainable career option it would require improvements in areas that affect the loss of enjoyment and passion such as the stress that causes mental and physical exhaustion, long working hours and income insecurity. In the meantime, online poker should be seen as an ongoing life rather than career path.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

This concluding chapter revisits the study's research questions and draws conclusions, highlighting the new contributions to knowledge made by the study. It discusses the research questions in relation to the empirical data and the literature reviewed in chapters 1-3 and discusses the contributions of the study to existing knowledge and to various theoretical debates. It then discusses the limitations of the study and concludes with recommendations for future research.

9.2 Research questions revisited

This study began with a broad interest in virtual workers who operate outside of conventional working relations and have no publicly recognised work identity. It positioned the investigation of these workers in the broad context of the changing world of work, the emergence of entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity and the trend towards managing multiple areas of the self as a response to labour market uncertainties. The research set out to study how the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity manifests in virtual workers who do not fit into existing categories of employment or occupation. It focused on professional online poker players as an extreme case of such non-standard forms of work.

Exploratory research, carried out within a clear conceptual framework was needed to address this question. Consequently, I conducted in-depth interviews with 39 individuals between December 2012 and May 2014 and developed an analytical framework based on existing studies about the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity and practices of self-management. It was necessary to have such an analytical base because there was no one body of literature to draw on. The interdisciplinary analytical framework helped form research questions and structure the exploration of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity in the context of a 'hidden' occupational group. In doing so, I found that the trend

towards self-management could not be understood without taking account of the trajectory from amateur to professional playing. For this purpose, a three-stage model (see Chapter 5) was developed that not only made it possible to analyse the process of formation of a professional identity but also, by studying the reasons that players decided to abandon this role, also identified the aspects of this profession that were difficult to sustain over time. In the next sections, I revisit the research questions in relations to the empirical data and the literature that I reviewed in this report.

The study aimed to address the broad question: How do isolated online workers manage themselves in the absence of formal organisational control or socially recognised occupational norms, and what are the effects of this self-management on the quality of their working lives? This led to the following sub-questions:

1. What areas of work or the self are professional online poker players managing?
2. How do they manage themselves?
3. How do poker players graduate from recreational into professional playing?
4. To what extent are professional online poker players genuinely autonomous? Is this autonomy constrained?
5. What are the personal costs and benefits of self-management among professional online poker players?
6. What are the implications of this for long-term sustainability of professional online poker playing as an occupation?

In the course of carrying out the research it became apparent that these questions are strongly interconnected and cannot be answered without reference to each other.

9.2.1 Online poker-playing as a form of work

The first question to be answered was whether professional poker playing really can be viewed as a form of work. It was clear that the majority of the respondents 'strove' to make a living out of it, and considered it as their work activity which was also recognised as such by a community of fellow professionals. This conforms with a broad concept of work according to which work also exists outside of waged labour (Applebaum, 1992, Blyton and Jenkins, 2007, Glucksmann, 2005, Grint, 2005, Joyce, 1987, Pahl, 1988a, Parry et al., 2006, Taylor, 2004, Wadel, 1979, Wallman, 1979, Watson, 2003). It also conforms with the idea that whether something is work or not can be established by looking at agents' attitude (Goggin, 2011), or those of other similar agents (Bourdieu, 1984: 482). Since all these features were present among my respondents and applied in the majority of cases, it was justifiable to conclude that the sort of professional online gambling they engaged in could be viewed as work. This made it possible to look at the respondents through the lens of sociology and draw on concepts from sociology of work when analysing the findings.

I found that these players represent an extreme type of virtual worker who have to deal with risk and uncertainty on a daily basis. Risks and uncertainties are inherent to poker because poker is a game that contains an element of luck and is thus a work activity with uncertain financial outcomes. In this respect, professional online poker players have a lot of features in common with other more general forms of work that are affected by risks, constraints and labour market uncertainties (see e.g. Bauman, 2004, Beck, 2000, Neff, 2012).

9.2.2 Identity formation in professional poker playing and the role of self-management

This study made a contribution to understanding the role of self-management in developing the sense of professionalism in 'hidden' occupations. I found that poker players' identity as professionals, as opposed to recreational players, is formed as a combination of individual and external collective processes. It is created and maintained by identification with other professionals and by efforts

to work on different areas of the self. The collective identity is formed through common language, patterns of mutual support and coaching, the cult of celebrity players, the construction of recreational players as 'others' and through communities of practice. The internal individual identity is produced and reproduced through continuous efforts put into training and the definition of a bundle of skills, in which self-organisation and self-control are of key importance. Professional poker players constantly need to learn new skills and refine existing ones with the aim of mastering the game and matching the idealised image of a professional, which is defined by the ability to control emotions, train their body and physical acuity and organise their daily work activities. These strategies help players manage a wide variety of risks and uncertainties and cope with the negative emotions caused by financial loss. They correspond to three forms of work on the self: self-directed organisation of daily work activities, body-work-practices on the self and self-directed learning that falls into the category of career self-management. In summary, self-management is crucial for poker players' ability to maintain their professional identity. Furthermore, management of these three areas of the self is also a central issue in the process of becoming a professional player. Indeed, graduating from recreational into professional playing is largely defined by the processes by which players learn to master various practices of self-organisation and to control their emotions.

It can be concluded that self-management in online poker is interlinked with broader processes of identity formation. This confirms the findings of several other authors who have suggested that self-management can be seen as a form of identity management (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, Fleming and Sturdy, 2009, Neff et al., 2005: 308). It goes beyond these authors, who based their studies on work in formal occupations and work relations, in demonstrating that this also holds good among 'hidden' workers.

My study found that despite the lack of formal recognition as an occupation, there are informal processes that help construct a sense of professionalism in online poker. I found strong evidence to support the assumption that the professional self is constructed based on a normative idea of what a professional player looks

like. This confirms the suggestion by Istrate (2011) who studied offline and online poker players that the construction of the professional self in poker is based on the identification with other similar agents and on a shared understanding of the profession. My study goes beyond this by showing the importance of self-management in forming this individual identity.

This thesis also goes beyond the state of the art in gambling studies. Existing studies have only established that self-management is a distinctive feature of professional poker playing without making a distinction between offline and online players or studying the ways that self-management is applied to different processes (Bjerg, 2010, Hayano, 1977, Hayano, 1982, Hayano, 1984, McCormack and Griffiths, 2012, Radburn and Horsley, 2011, Weinstock et al., 2013). I was not only able to establish that self-management is of key importance to professional online poker playing but was also able to distinguish between its importance for the formation of individual identity and for the process of graduating from recreational to professional playing.

9.2.3 Practices of self-management

Furthermore, this study contributes to the knowledge about practices of self-management by identifying which areas of their work and selves online poker players manage and how they do so. I found that professional online poker players manage at least three areas of the self as part of their occupational practice. They are involved in body-work-practices on the self, self-directed organisation of daily work activities and career self-management. The body-work-practices on the self appear in the form of control of emotions, and keeping oneself physically fit. Playing poker can create strong emotional responses both positive and negative ones. Learning to control emotions, especially the negative ones caused by financial losses, is seen as of particular importance to professional poker playing. In addition to this, professional players need to be physically and mentally fit so that they can cope with the speed of online poker and work in a highly concentrated manner for many consecutive hours. With regard to the self-directed organisation of daily work activities, professional players are expected to

organise their daily work activities themselves, be proactive and disciplined, adopting distinctive patterns of the organisation of daily work activities especially with regard to managing time and finances (for example, professional online poker players plan their days ahead, follow the same daily or weekly routine, divide their play time into sessions, take regular breaks, manage their finances and play at multiple tables). Career self-management as a form of work on the self is also present in the form of self-directed learning throughout poker players' careers and efforts put into planning, employability and looking for alternative sources of income. Further evidence comes from the respondents' own views. They felt strongly that they were responsible for investing in their skills if they wanted to succeed as professional players or find an alternative career. It was evident that players had adopted self-directed learning as a strategy to manage risks, stay competitive but also maintain their image as a professional.

These findings reinforce professional online poker as an emerging occupation in so far as these practices and strategies were present among workers despite their geographical isolation.

These findings also provide evidence for the argument that entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity emerges as a response to risks and uncertain environments (Briscoe et al., 2012, Neff, 2012: 88). All of these activities in relation to managing multiple areas of the self are aimed in one way or another not only at managing the risks and uncertainties inherent to poker but also those that occur in the wider environment.

9.2.4 The construction of entrepreneurial worker subjectivity

This study provides evidence of the management of multiple areas of the self in professional online poker players. These players have to manage, alone, a complex range of risks and uncertainties that make high demands on their capacities for control. The self-management skills and practices that they have developed support the proposition that professional online poker players have adopted an entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity, discussed in Section 3.3.4, that

has been observed in other areas of work (Gill, 2010, Neff, 2012, Ross, 2003). While some of the practices and the combination of areas of the self that players managed were specific to online poker, I also found strong similarities with workers in formal work relations. However, it is noteworthy that professional online poker players had adopted these practices as part of their occupational practice and identity formation rather than as outcomes of individual calculation. This suggests that entrepreneurial subjectivity can also emerge in the absence of socially recognised occupational norms and formal organisational control, giving evidence that informal norms and values are communicated through individual and informal groups of players. This in turn suggests that the lessons learned from the way that the professional selves of online poker players are constructed as entrepreneurial and self-managing subjects can be generalised to other groups of workers, regardless of their formal employment status and attachments to organisations, and are emblematic of the 'new worker' (Gorz, 2003a, Rose, 1992).

9.2.5 Relations of autonomy and control

The study analysed the relations of autonomy and control among professional online poker players and found that although players did not feel restricted in their autonomy, this was nevertheless constrained both by external and self-imposed factors. This created conflictual relations of autonomy among professional online poker players, both among independent players and among players who were involved in 'staking' – an arrangement in which a poker player is provided with a 'stake' (money), and in some cases with training, in exchange for a share of the winnings. While all players faced external restrictions that derive from a number of economic, social and technological factors and their personal commitments, stakees' autonomy was further restricted by a range of management practices and forms of monitoring and surveillance that were exercised by stakers. This study found that players' apparent autonomy was underpinned by forms of self-management resulting from external restrictions and power relations with stakers. This reinforces the finding that self-management at work is in reality an internalised form of external constraints or managerial control (Burawoy, 1979, Garrahan and Stewart, 1992) and that it is

through this internalisation process that new subjectivities are constructed (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, Banks, 2007) and thus makes a further contribution to the literature in this field.

These findings further reinforce the suggestion that professional online poker players had adopted an entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity because of the obscured and conflicting relations of autonomy that they experienced. This is in line with the conclusion that paradoxes with regard to autonomy contribute to the production of the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity (Charalambides, 2017, Kalff, 2017, Lorey, 2009, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016).

Another major contribution of the study comes from the discovery of power relationships in staking arrangements which reveals the existence of an employee-employer like relationship in professional online poker. This has not been previously studied.

9.2.6 Personal costs and benefits of self-management

Finally the study makes a contribution to the understanding of the causes of work-related stress and negative work-life balance. I found that although self-management is crucial to players' ability to maintain their identity as professionals, they pay a high personal price for it in terms of physical and mental exhaustion and boundaryless working life. Professional players suffer from stresses caused by insecure income, precariousness, intensity of work and negative work life balance. Thus studying players' reasons for leaving professional poker gives insights into the downsides of professional online poker and the continuous work on the self. This study confirms the findings from an existing body of literature that work on the self produces and maintains negative effects on workers such as emotional strain (Hochschild, 1985, Pugliesi, 1999), self-exploitation (Norkus et al., 2016) and precariousness (Lorey, 2009). Previous studies had only established that professional offline poker players face problems related to emotional stress and work-life balance (Bjerg, 2010, Hing et al., 2015,

Hing et al., 2016, McCormack and Griffiths, 2012). However, this study has extended it to professional online poker players, described them in detail and made a contribution to the literature about the entrepreneurial self by providing strong evidence for a linkage between self-management and negative effects on workers' lives. Furthermore, many authors have argued that conflicting relations of autonomy reinforce negative effects of self-management (Burawoy, 1979, Charalambides, 2017, Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2013, Lorey, 2009, Lupu and Empson, 2015, Menger, 1999, Pérez-Zapata et al., 2016). Given that this research found obscured and conflicting relations of autonomy among professional online poker players it is possible that they reinforce some of the vulnerabilities as suggested by other authors.

In summary, these negative effects make it difficult to sustain a career as a professional online poker player, and this leads to the conclusion that professional online poker is unlikely to constitute a long-term career. Nevertheless these negative features are combined in complex ways with positives. Initially poker players feel passionate about the game, value and strive for autonomy. However, the quest for autonomy which motivates players to transition into professional poker in the first place leads to self-managing practices for which they have to pay a high personal cost, which in turn destroys the pleasure they had originally gained from poker. This study also revealed that professional players develop entrepreneurial skills that can be transferred to other activities and help find a way out of professional poker. It can be concluded that entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity encapsulates a range of paradoxes and contradictory patterns. These can affect the sustainability of an emerging online occupation, in particular if there are no professional norms or regulations to protect workers from negative effects.

9.3 Theoretical implications

First and foremost, this study advances the understanding of emerging forms of virtual work. The findings can be readily generalised to other emerging online

work activities where people work in isolation and outside of conventional working relations. Given the increasingly widespread need for workers to adopt entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity as part of their occupation or workplace requirement this research may be generalisable even beyond virtual workers. It may also have relevance for other groups of workers who are being pushed into isolated, individualised forms of work where they are expected to act as entrepreneurs. Furthermore, this study confirms the importance of focusing on self-management practices in non-standard forms of work. It focused on professional online poker players as an extreme case of such non-standard form of work. Taking the extreme example sheds light on less extreme examples of non-standard forms of work and shows that questions with regard to the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity also need to be explored outside the context of traditional forms of employment and self-employment. The study also makes an important contribution to the literature about occupational identity, especially in relation to research about hidden occupations. It sheds light on how occupational identities are formed in hidden and emerging occupations and the importance of self-management in forming the professional self.

9.4 Limitations of the study

The main limitations of the study relate to the sample and to the literature that this study draws on. This research combined studies from various disciplines because the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity has not been researched in the context of 'hidden' occupations. Most of the existing studies have explored the phenomenon in the context of workers in formal work relations or self-employed in publicly recognised occupations. However, even in the context of formal organisations there was no one body of literature to draw on. Concepts that relate to and explain the entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity were scattered across a range of discussions and disciplines. For this reason I developed an interdisciplinary analytical framework that brought together concepts from a large number of studies, put them in relation to each other and harmonised the language so that research questions could be more easily developed. However, combining studies, even if they are on the same subject matter, from different

disciplines can be challenging. There are differences in vocabulary, terms and underlying assumptions. Although I was aware of these limitations when I developed the analytical framework, it was not possible to address all of them. Thus there are shortcomings with regard to the analytical framework that incorporates the literature on self-management practices. For instance, the representation of disciplines is uneven in the framework. Furthermore, this study makes use of a number of terms (to avoid repetitions or for stylistic reasons) to refer to the trend towards self-management. However, their definitions in respective disciplines may vary slightly. It was not possible to compare and harmonise all the definitions.

With regard to the sample, as there were no reliable figures on the scale and significance of professional online poker playing it is not possible to assess to what degree the sample of this study represents the population. Given the hidden nature of the phenomenon it was a major achievement to identify and find access to 39 individuals. However, the snowballing method did not generate a random sample. The sample of this study is biased towards male respondents because they introduced me to their other, predominantly male, colleagues. Female players appeared not to be connected to the networks I had access to. Similarly, the country coverage may not be representative of the real geographical distribution of professional players. Although my findings showed that there were no significant differences between players in those 10 countries I interviewed, another sample with different country coverage could produce different results.

9.5 Recommendations for future research

Given the exploratory character of the research about a largely unstudied topic, these finding could be refined and applied to other groups of workers. Future research could focus on other forms of hidden online work or explore to what extent these patterns are typical of virtual work in general or other types of non-standard forms of work. Given the current growth in these, there is a strong policy interest in virtual work and in non-standard forms of work in particular.

However, research on entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity in this context is largely missing.

This study revealed that processes of identity formation and entrepreneurial worker-subjectivity are closely linked. This finding could be linked to the literature about occupational identity and in particular about identity formation in 'hidden' or 'dirty work' (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999, Hughes, 1951) to understand better the processes of identity formation among professional online poker players.

Literature about gambling and poker players in particular has interpreted stress and negative work-life balance among professional poker players as a form of problem gambling (Bjerg, 2010, Dufour et al., 2015). However, these negative effects could also be the result of work on the self that the occupation as a professional poker player requires and as this study has shown. Classifying professional online poker players who suffer from emotional stress as problem gamblers would therefore be a misinterpretation of reality. Existing debates about problem gambling would therefore benefit if they used the finding of this study to complement their research.

Future research could also explore the gender dimension of professional online poker playing to investigate, for example, the assumption that women tend to be more risk averse than men (Charness and Gneezy, 2012). It could reveal to what degree the findings of this study are an illustration of typical gender behaviour especially with regard to risk taking in professional online poker playing.

Future studies could focus on the repurposing of entrepreneurial skills that this study revealed. Professional players acquire entrepreneurial skills that can be transferred to other activities and help find a way out of professional poker. Understanding these dynamics and the skills that are transferred could be interesting for entrepreneurship research but also for labour sociology.

Finally, the power relationship in staking arrangements, especially with regard to its similarity to an employee-employer like relationship could be an interesting avenue to explore in the future. Staking arrangements in online poker may indicate the emergence of a new phenomenon that has not been researched before but could provide new insights into how and what type of occupations and work activities emerge in online spaces.

Appendices

Appendix A - List of respondents according to the stage they were in

Nickname	Gender	Age	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
Lennard	male	22	exploring the game		
Peeter	male	24		full-time professional player	
Rando	male	25 (played when he was 22-23 years old)		had quit poker during the (part-time) professional phase	
Udo	male	31		full-time professional player	
Stanko	male	28		part-time professional player in the past	employee at a poker-related company
Todor	male	22		full-time professional player	
Donovan	male	32		full-time professional player	
Morten	male	37		full-time professional player in the past	had opened (not poker-related) company from his poker winnings
Suzana	female	34		part-time professional player	
Stojan	male	40		full-time professional player in the past	had opened a poker-related company
Max	male	29		full-time professional player in the past	had opened a poker-related company
Paul	male	31		transitioning from full-time professional player to opening a poker-related business	
Cornel	male	30	exploring the game		
Sebi	male	22	had quit poker in the exploratory phase		
Roman	male	41		full-time professional player	tried to enter stage III but gave up
Florin	male	n/a		part-time professional player in the past	had opened a poker-related company
Adrian	male	28		part-time professional player in the past	had opened a company (not poker-related)

Mihai	male	42	exploring the game		
Horia	male	33	transitioning from exploratory phase to being a professional player		
Alex	male	33		full-time professional player	
Andrei	male	33		full-time professional player in the past	had opened a poker-related company
Costin	male	n/a		full-time professional player	
Boris	male	25		part-time professional player	
Nicu	male	33		full-time professional player	
Mario	male	30		full-time professional player	
Claudia	female	22		full-time professional player	
Sorin	male	20		part-time professional player	
Darius	male	22	exploring the game		
Katariina	female	39		full-time professional player in the past	employee at a poker-related company
Indrek	male	38		full-time professional player	
Richard	male	24		full-time professional player	
Margus	male	25		part-time professional player	
Total	**32 players**				

Appendix B - Survey about Gaming Culture and the World of Warcraft

Introduction

The purpose of this survey is to find out about people's experience with the World of Warcraft. The study is about gaming culture and how it relates to our everyday life. How does the Internet change the way we earn our living? Has it changed our understanding of what work is in our global world? The survey contains 33 short questions, and will take round 5 minutes to complete.

The survey is undertaken by Kaire Holts who is an independent researcher at the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom. This research has no connection to any of the gaming companies or government agencies. Your answers will be treated strictly confidentially and anonymously in accordance with good scientific practice. If you decide to leave your contact information for further queries, it will be separated from your answers so that it will not be associated with the answers you have provided.

If you need any further information then please contact me at k.holts(at)herts.ac.uk or if you want to check my credibility then please check out my supervisor Professor Ursula Huws at the University of Hertfordshire: http://researchprofiles.herts.ac.uk/portal/en/persons/ursula-huws(5231f0dc-26ad-450e-925a-cf1f6629d5b5).html

mandatory

1. Do you think that playing online games...
(select all that apply)

- is fun
- is a waste of time
- is a way to escape real life
- Is a way to make friends
- is a way to make some money
- Is a good way to develop some skills
- Online games are strictly for geeks
- I don't have any opinion about this

mandatory

2. Do you use the Internet to supplement your income?

- Yes, sometimes
- No, never
- Not sure/ rather not say

optional

3. Which of the following things have you done online in the last 12 months? (*select all that apply*)

- Played online Poker
- Worked for Amazon Mechanical Turk
- Played Second Life
- Sold something on Ebay
- Worked through oDesk
- Worked through Elance
- Earned money through 'Pay per Click'
- Played Diablo III
- None of these

****

- Anything else that produced some income (*please specify*): _____**(optional)**

----next page---

mandatory

4. Have you played World of Warcraft (WOW) in the last 12 months?

- Yes
- No
- Don´t know

mandatory

5. Has WOW helped you to earn real money?

- I don't play WOW
- Yes, a little bit
- Yes, significantly
- No, it hasn't
- I've lost money when playing WOW
- WOW is there to play and not to earn money
- Don't know

mandatory

6. Have other online games helped you to earn money?

- I don't play online games
- Yes, a little bit
- Yes, significantly
- No, they haven't
- Playing them has cost me money
- Don't know

optional

7. When you play online games, where do you mostly do it? (*select all that apply*)
   - I don't play online games
   - at home
   - at an Internet café
   - at work
   - at school, college or university
   - at a friend's place
   - Don't know

     ****
   - Other (*please specify)*: _____

---next page ---

8. How much do you agree with each of the following statements? Even if you don't play WOW we would still appreciate your opinion on this. (WOW = World of Warcraft)

- optional
- select one response per question

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don´t know
a. Playing World of Warcraft (WOW) is fun					
b. WOW helps to meet up with friends virtually					
c. Playing games is a way to escape real life					
d. WOW is good for earning real money					
e. Playing WOW distracts from study or work					
f. Playing WOW can make family or partners feel excluded					
g. WOW helps to make new friends					
h. Playing WOW is a waste of time					
i. WOW is great when					

there is nothing else to do					
j. WOW is only for young people					
k. WOW is a way to develop some skills					
l. WOW can became addictive					

---next page—

mandatory

9. In which country were you born? (*select an answer)*
   - Rather not say
   - Other
   - If you selected Other, please specify:_____

mandatory

10. In which country do you live now? (*select an answer)*
    - In the same country I was born
    - Rather not say
    - Other
    - If you selected Other, please specify:_____

mandatory

11. Do you live in a...?
    - A village or the countryside
    - A town/ small city
    - A large city
    - Rather not say
    - **********
    - Other (*please specify*)_____

optional

12. Please specify the name of the city/town/ village you live in (optional)
_____

----next page---

mandatory

13. Are you:
    - male

- female
- Rather not say

mandatory

14. What is your age?
    - Under 18 years old
    - 18-20 years old
    - 20-25 years old
    - 25-30 years old
    - 31-40 years old
    - 41-50 years old
    - Over 50
    - Rather not say

mandatory

15. Employment Status: Are you currently…? (*select all that apply)*
    a. A student
    b. Permanently employed
    c. Temporarily employed
    d. Self-employed
    e. Working in my family's business
    f. Unemployed
    g. I don't need to work
    h. Unable to work
    i. Rather not say
    ****
    j. Other (*please specify*): _____

optional

16. What stage of education have you reached so far? I have completed…(*select all that apply)*
    a. secondary school/ high school
    b. apprenticeship/ technical/ vocational training
    c. undergraduate degree (e.g. Bachelor's degree)
    d. Master's degree
    e. Doctoral degree
    f. Rather not say
    ****
    g. Other (*please specify*)_____

optional

17. Which languages you speak? (*optional*)
    - Select an answer_____
    - 2nd language (if applicable)
    - 3rd language (if applicable)
    - None of these
    - Add any other languages you speak and that were not in the list:

optional

18. Do you live? (*select all that apply)*
    a. Alone
    b. With my parents
    c. With my partner
    d. In a shared flat or house
    e. My employer provides a place for me
    f. with my child/children
    g. In school, college or university accommodation
    ****
    h. Other (*please specify*)_____

optional

19. Are you?
    - Single
    - In a relationship
    - Married
    - Rather not say
    ****
    - Other (*please specify*)

-----next page----

optional

20. In which realm do you play? (*select all that apply)*
    - PvE(Player versus Environment)
    - PvP (Player versus Player)
    - RP (Role Playing)
    - RP-PvP (Role Playing plus Players versus Players, Roleplaying version of a PvP realm)
    - PTR (Public Test Realm)
    - I don't play WOW
    - Don't know

optional

21. What is your favourite WOW server to play on? (*select all that apply)*
    a. US Pacific
    b. US Mountain
    c. US Central
    d. US Eastern
    e. Oceania sub-region
    f. Latin America sub-region
    g. Brazil sub-region
    h. English sub-region
    i. French sub-region
    j. German sub-region
    k. Spanish sub-region
    l. Russian sub-region
    m. China (Shanghai, China Telecom)
    n. China (Beijing, China Netcom)
    o. China (Sichuan, China Telecom)
    p. China (Guangdong, China Telecom)
    q. Taiwan
    r. Korea
    s. I don't play WOW
    t. Don't know
    ****
    u. Other (*please specify*) _____

optional

22. On which level do you play? (*select all that apply)*
    - level 1-20
    - level 21-40
    - level 41-60
    - level 61-70
    - level 71-80
    - level 81-90
    - I don't play WOW
    - Don't know

optional

23. How many WOW characters do you have?
    - only 1
    - 1-3
    - 3-5
    - more than 5
    - I don't play WOW
    - Don't know
    ****
    - Other (*please specify*)

---next page---

optional

24. How many hours per week do you play WOW?
    - less than 4 hours
    - 5-9 hours
    - 10-14 hours
    - 15-19 hours
    - 20-24 hours
    - more than 25 hours
    - I don't play WOW
    - Don't know

optional

25. How many days a week do you play WOW?
    - 1 day or less
    - 2-3 days
    - 4-5 days
    - 6-7 days
    - I don't play WOW
    - Don't know

optional

26. How many years have you been playing WOW?
    - less than 1 year
    - 1-2 years
    - 3-4 years
    - 4-5 years
    - more than 5 years
    - I don't play WOW
    - Don't know

optional

27. How do you get items (e.g. epic, legendary) in the game? (*select all that apply)*
    a. I buy them from my own gold
    b. I use real money to get them
    c. I get them as a reward
    d. I get them as a gift from another player
    e. I haven't got any items
    f. I don't play WOW
    g. I don't know

optional

28.Have you ever bought any WOW characters?

- No, I haven't
- I've been thinking of doing it
- Yes, I've already bought characters
- I don't play WOW
- Don't know

optional

29. How do you get gold in a game?

- I farm the gold myself
- Sometimes I buy it
- I haven't got any gold
- I don't play WOW

  ****
- Other (*please specify*)_____

optional

30. Have you ever transferred a WOW character, gold or an account to another player?

- Yes, I have
- No, I haven't
- I don't play WOW
- Rather not say

optional

31. Do you know other people who also play WOW?

- Yes, I do
- No, I don't
- Don't know

Do you sometimes play together? (*optional*)

- Yes, we do
- No, we don't
- I don't play WOW
- Don't know

optional

32.How do you pay for your WOW account? I have a… (*select all that apply)*

- Free subscription
- I pay per minute (points card)
- 1-month subscription
- 3-month subscription

- 6-month subscription
- I play for free because someone else pays for the subscription
- I don't play WOW
- Don't know

optional

33. If you would you like to provide any additional information about your experience with the World of Warcraft or with other online games then please do it here (optional). Or if you are curious about the results of the survey, please leave your email address here to be notified when the analysis is published:_____

optional

34. We would also be interested in asking you more questions on the same topic. Please leave your email address if you're interested in answering further questions. We would contact you by email*.

* If you decided to leave your email address then it will be separated from your answers you have provided in the survey

(Last page)

Your responses have been submitted.

Thank you very much for taking your time and for completing the survey.

Example of the text that was used to announce the survey in online forums:
This is a research about the World of Warcraft to find out what are the challenges, who is the typical player, on which server and how often he or she plays and how the WOW relates to our everyday life. If you are interested in the results then please take 5 minutes and fill in this survey: http://surveywow.wordpress.com/ The survey is in English, Spanish and Russian and completely anonymous. The survey is undertaken by an independent researcher at the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom.

Appendix C - Demographics of research participants

pseudo-nym	role (main role as defined by respondents)	gender	age	education	relationship status	country of residence	country of origin	date of the interview	length of the interview
POKER PLAYERS									
Lennard	poker player	male	22	discontinued university studies	in a relationship (not living together)	Estonia	Estonia	27.12.2012	01:54
Peeter	poker player	male	24	discontinued vocational training	single	Estonia	Estonia	27.12.2012	01:54
Rando	poker player	male	25	studying at university	single	Estonia	Estonia	28.12.2012	01:07
Udo	poker player	male	31	university degree (Master's)	in a relationship	Estonia	Estonia	31.12.2012	02:15
Todor	poker player	male	22	discontinued university studies	in a relationship	Bulgaria	Bulgaria	26.07.2013	01:48
Donovan	poker player	male	32	university degree (Bachelor's)	single	travelling	Ireland	28.07.2013	00:55
Morten	poker player (mainly in the past)	male	37	vocational training (in Norway)	in a relationship but was single when played poker full time	Norway/ Malta	Norway	28.07.2013	00:41
Suzana	poker player	female	34	vocational training	single	Croatia	Croatia	28.07.2013	00:30
Max	poker player	male	29	university degree (Master's)	in a relationship	Mexico	Switzerland	15.08.2013	01:13
Paul	poker player	male	31	discontinued university studies	in a relationship	UK	France	08.09.2013	02:21
Cornel	poker player	male	30	university degree (degree in law)	in a relationship	Romania	Romania	02.11.2013	01:09
Sebi	poker player (in the past)	male	22	studying at university	in a relationship	Romania	Romania	02.11.2013	00:30
Roman	poker player	male	41	vocational training	single	Romania	Czech Republic	02.11.2013	01:17
Adrian	poker player (in the past)	male	28	university degree (Master's)	in a relationship but was single when played poker	Romania	Romania	02.11.2013	01:24

Mihai	poker player	male	42	discontinued doctoral degree	single	Romania/ US	Romania	04.11.2013	01:25
Horia	poker player	male	33	university degree (Master's)	married with children	Romania	Romania	05.11.2013	00:29
Alex	poker player	male	33	A -level	in a relationship (not living together)	Romania	Romania	06.11.2013	00:23
Costin	poker player	male	NA	NA	could not specify	Romania	Romania	08.11.2013	00:41
Boris	poker player	male	25	studying at university	in a relationship (not living together)	Romania	Hungary/ Romania	08.11.2013	01:18
Nicu	poker player	male	33	university degree	married	Romania	Romania	11.11.2013	01:25
Mario	poker player	male	30	NA	married	Romania	Romania	11.11.2013	01:25
Claudia	poker player	female	22	university degree (Bachelor's)	single	Romania	Romania	13.11.2013	01:32
Sorin	poker player	male	20	studying at university	single	Romania	Romania	13.11.2013	00:52
Darius	poker player	male	22	studying at university	in a relationship (not living together)	Romania	Romania	13.11.2013	00:52
Katariina	poker player	female	39	university degree (Master's)	married with children	Estonia	Estonia	27.12.2013	01:07
Indrek	poker player	male	38	A-level	married with children	Estonia	Estonia	27.12.2013	01:07
Richard	poker player	male	24	studying at university	single	Estonia	Estonia	27.12.2013	01:10
Margus	poker player	male	25	A-level	in a relationship	Estonia	Estonia	03.01.2014	01:11
FOUNDERS or OWNERS of a POKER-RELATED BUSINESS									
Stojan	founder or owner of a poker-related business	male	40	university degree, discontinued doctoral degree	in a relationship (with children)	Bulgaria	Bulgaria	29.07.2013	02:07
Florin	founder or owner of a poker-related business	male	NA	university degree (Doctoral)	married with children	Romania	Romania	03.11.2013	01:23
Andrei	founder or owner of a poker-related business	male	33	university degree	in a relationship	Romania	Romania	08.11.2013	01:41

WORKERS[1] in a POKER-RELATED COMPANY									
Stanko	worker in a poker-related company	male	28	discontinued university studies	single	Bulgaria	Bulgaria	22.07.2013	02:10
Maria	worker in a poker-related company	female	31	A-level	in a relationship (with children)	Malta	Estonia	07.01.2014	01:12
GOLD FARMERS									
Liu	online gamer	male	NA	university degree	in a relationship (not living together)	UK	China	13.12.2012	01:23
Demir	online gamer (in the past)	male	23	studying at university	single	UK	UK/ Turkey	18.02.2013	00:37
Radu	online gamer	male	36	vocational training	married with children	Romania	Romania	14.11.2013	01:31
ONLINE TRADERS									
Ethan	trader	male	34	vocational training	single	UK	UK	18.05.2014	02:02
EXPERTS									
Elliot	former trade union representative of workers in the gambling industry	male	NA	university degree (Doctoral)	NA	UK	UK	12.08.2013	01:10
Ralph	managing director of a consulting company in the field of trading	male	NA	NA	NA	UK	UK	15.04.2014	01:40

[1] I interviewed people as individuals and not representatives of a particular company

Appendix D - Informed consent in English

Participant Identification Number:

CONSENT FORM

PROJECT TITLE: 'Real Work in Virtual Worlds'

Name of Researcher: Kaire Holts

This is a study about online gambling and how it relates to our everyday life. The purpose of this interview is to find out about people´s experience with online poker, other types of gambling and online activities. It is undertaken by Kaire Holts who is an independent researcher at the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom. This research has no connection to any of the gambling companies or government agencies. Your answers will be treated strictly confidentially and anonymously in accordance with good scientific practice.

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. ☐

3. I agree that my data gathered in this study may be stored (after it has been anonymised) and may be used for future research. ☐

4. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, articles or presentations by the research team. ☐

5. I understand that my name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentations. ☐

6. I agree to the interview being audio recorded ☐

7. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

Kaire Holts – Doctoral Student - Creative Industries Research and Consultancy Unit –
Hertfordshire Business School – University of Hertfordshire - de Havilland Campus - AL10 9AB Hatfield - United Kingdom
◆ *Email: k.holts@herts.ac.uk* ◆

17th July 2013

Appendix E - Informed consent in Romanian

Numărul de identificare participant:

FORMULAR DE CONSIMȚAMANT

TITLUL PROIECTULUI: 'Munci reale în lumi virtuale´

Nume cercetator: Kaire Holts

Acesta este un studiu cu privire la jocurile de noroc on-line și la modul în care aceastea ne influențează la viața zi cu zi. Scopul acestui interviu este de a afla mai multe despre experiența oamenilor cu privire la poker-ul online, precum și cu privire la alte tipuri de activități de tip jocuri de noroc on-line. Studiul este realizat de Kaire Holts, o cercetătoare independentă de la Universitatea din Hertfordshire, Marea Britanie. Aceasta cercetare nu are nici o legătură cu niciuna dintre companiile de jocuri de noroc sau instituțiile guvernamentale din domeniu, scopul ei fiind pur științific.

Răspunsurile dumneavoastră vor fi tratate strict confidențial și anonim, în conformitate cu bunele practici academice.

Vă rugăm să bifați căsuța

1. Confirm că am citit și înțeles informațiile pentru studiul de mai sus și am putut pune întrebări de clarificare. ☐

2. Înțeleg că participarea mea e voluntară și că sunt liber să mă retrag în orice moment, fără a invoca motive. ☐

3. Sunt de acord ca datele mele (anonime) să poată fi păstrate și utilizate pentru cercetări viitoare. ☐

4. Înțeleg că orice informație dată de mine pot fi utilizată în rapoarte de cercetare, articole științifice sau prezentări publice făcute de echipa de cercetare. ☐

5. Am înțeles că numele meu nu va apărea în niciun raport, articol sau prezentare publică. ☐

6. Sunt de acord ca interviul să fie înregistrat audio. ☐

7. Sunt de acord să iau parte la studiul de mai sus. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Numele participantului	Data	Semnătura
_____	_____	_____
Cercetător	Data	Semnătura

Kaire Holts – Doctorand - Creative Industries Instituție de cercetare și consultanță –
Hertfordshire Business School – Universitatea din Hertfordshire - de Havilland Campus - AL10 9AB Hatfield – Marea Britanie
◆ *E-mail: k.holts@herts.ac.uk* ◆

10 octombrie 2013

Appendix F - Confidentiality agreement: interpreter

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Interpretation Services

PROJECT TITLE: 'Real Work in Virtual Worlds'

I, _____, interpreter, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any information received during face-to-face interviews conducted by Ms Kaire Holts and any documentation received from her related to her doctoral study on Virtual Work (online gambling and gaming). Furthermore, I agree:

1. To keep all research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the information in any form or format with anyone other than the primary investigator;

2. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual revealed during a live oral interview, or in any other raw data;

3. To not make copies of any raw data in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts), unless specifically requested to do so by the primary investigator;

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information received during a live oral interview.

Interpreter's name (printed) _____

Interpreter's signature _____

Date _____

Appendix G - Confidentiality agreement: transcription service

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

Transcription Services

PROJECT TITLE: 'Real Work in Virtual Worlds'

I, _____, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audio files and documentation received from Ms Kaire Holts related to her doctoral study on Virtual Work (online gambling and gaming). Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audio interviews, or in any associated documents;

2. To not make copies of any audio files or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by Kaire Holts;

3. To store all study-related audio files and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;

4. To delete all electronic files containing study-related documents from my computer hard drive and any backup devices.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audio files and/or files to which I will have access.

Transcriber's name (printed) _____

Transcriber's signature _____

Date _____

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