**What game are we playing at?**

**Micaela Castiglioni[[1]](#footnote-1) & Carola Girotti[[2]](#footnote-2)**

This paper examines one of the dominant narratives in which we are immersed, which equates the flexibility, uncertainty and continuous change characterizing contemporary adulthood with the potential to continuously reinvent the self. This type of narrative, at least in the Italian context, can easily slide into a narrative rhetoric that is functional to the logic of the market and the consequent commercialization of all that belongs to “the human”. The ground is ripe for relegating to the background the unique and diverse narratives of individual adults: each bearing specific needs, anxieties, fears, fragilities, etc. born precisely of the constant mutability to which today’s personal and professional lives are subject. Two alternative ways of narrating the present? The outcome is undoubtedly a confused and confusing narrative in which fragility can easily turn into varying degrees of vulnerability, potentially leading some adults to adopt risk behaviours.

In this complex and problematic scenario, there are increasingly few spaces and extended timeframes in which adults have the opportunity to make intimate and deep contact with their own experience in any sphere. Among the types of experience that receive inadequate attention is that of playing games in adulthood.

Play would appear to be in contrast with work, as an activity that is both entertaining and relaxing, and which individuals can engage in as they want, for social rather than for economic gain.

Play however is a means of renewing the self and although it elicits feelings of pleasure and gratification, it can also feature dimensions of accountability, commitment and respect for rules and the moves of other players.

Among the authors whose work we draw on in this paper, Caillois (2013) proposes dividing games into two categories: *Alea* and *Agon.*

*Alea* is a Latin word whose literal translation is dice: it describes games whose outcome does not depend on the skill of the player but exclusively on chance. Hence, one’s opponent is not another player but destiny: players only need to wait to find out what fate has decided for them.

This category includes games that are highly passive in nature, in which competence has no bearing on the result: for example, roulette, lotteries and scratchcards.

Alea contrasts with the games in the *Agon* category, which require players to participate responsibly and draw on different kinds of ability, and whose categorical imperative is precisely that of *not* abandoning oneself to one’s fate. Agon demands patience, concentration, constant training and the subject’s will to determine, insofar as possible, the outcome of the game.

In sum, Alea involves waiting for Fate to decide on and execute its moves, while Agon exalts and leads us to exercise, and put to the test, our own physical and/or mental skills, encouraging perseverance and preparation.

This synthetic phenomenology of games sheds light on the deceptive contemporary narrative of “access to everything” and “everything at once” that “speaks to us” and “acts in us” (Bauman, 2012), and its successful sub-narrative – fuelled by advertising and other communication media – that frames gambling in all its forms (gaming halls, casinos, video games, scratchcards, etc.) as an opportunity to make one’s fortune and be successful without the need for effort or sacrifice. The phenomenon of gambling has become increasingly widespread over the past ten years, with increases in both the number of gaming halls and levels of Internet gambling. This has had negative side-effects at the social level, causing addiction and leading gamblers into debt. The all-pervasiveness and appeal of gambling makes it difficult for individuals to give it up.

The “official narrative” of instant gain without effort is split off from an equally official counter-narrative, promoted by educational and other agencies, that warns against these forms of “adult gaming”, encouraging more beneficial and growth-promoting forms of play.

The paradoxes of narrative? Narrative schizophrenia?

In any case, we believe it to be of vital importance that this counter-narrative be brought to the fore so that it may become one of the “discourses we live by”, prompting adults to re-turn to playing games in the sense of re-discovering the re-creational and positive functions of play, and helping them to identify new forms of play for entertainment, relaxation and socialization purposes.

In Italy, SerT and Gamblers Anonymous are two organizations that play a key role in educating adults, via narrative tools, to rediscover the positive aspects of playing games. More specifically, the programmes run by these organizations aim to help individuals de-construct both received and original (i.e., subjective, autobiographical and inner) narratives.

SerT (*Servizio per le Tossicodipendenze*), run by local health boards, is the main public health service offering recovery programmes for those affected by legal (e.g., alcohol) and illegal (e.g., cocaine, heroin) substance abuse and addiction and compulsive behaviours.

In recent years, this service has begun to work with individuals who are pathologically addicted to gambling even in the absence of an addiction to substances.

G.A. is a fellowship of men and women who have issues with compulsive gambling and who share their experience and strength with one another with a view to solving their common problem and helping others to recover from a gambling problem.

Clearly, some situations require clinical intervention, while in others a shared narrative dispositive of acceptance and recognition can be effective in providing a “secure base” from which to make a new start. Such dispositives, by offering compulsive gamblers the opportunity to speak and share their stories, and to feel temporarily legitimated while doing so, generate care effects and outcomes that are educational in nature.

**In what place and in what timeframe?**

The current political-economic-institutional and sociocultural context is shaping a complex globalized society characterized by uncertainty and risk, in which adults often find themselves beset by fragility, anxieties and problems leading them to become vulnerable and unstable (Bauman, 1999; Beck, 2000, Sennett, 1999).

In Bauman’s (2006) view, our social life today – differently to the past – is characterized by instability, whereby situations and events are subject to sudden and unforeseeable changes, and by existential uncertainty on the part of individuals whose identities are fragmented and complex as a result.

Life paths, both professional and personal, are marked by an excess of flexibility, insecurity and vulnerability, with inevitable implications for relationships and exchanges among adult subjects in everyday life contexts (Giddens, 1994; Bauman, 1999, 2003; Sennett, 1999). The bonds among individuals are fluid and inconsistent, there is a lack of sharing, concern, respectful recognition and emotional investment: “[…] new practices in personal relationships, now imbued with the dominant spirit of consumerism whereby the other is seen as a potential means of obtaining pleasant experiences” (*ibidem,* p.64), are mainly aimed at instrumentally achieving personal gain over the short term (Bauman, 1999; Giddens 1994).

Time and space have also been affected (Giddens, 1994, pp.28-31), in that traditional spaces are being taken over by spaces. Giddens (1994) observed that:

“In premodern societies, space and place largely coincided, since the spatial dimensions of social life are, for most of the population, dominated by presence – by localized activity. Modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between absent others, locationally distant from any given face-to-face interaction” (p.29).

Similarly, our experience of time is being impacted by the availability of rapid and long-distance virtual connections (Bauman, 1999; Giddens, 1994, pp. 28-31) that reflect the characteristic traits of electronic telecommunications in which sequentiality and linearity have been substituted by networks, nodes and links (Margiotta, 2005).

The time spent today with one’s family, at work, with friends, etc., is becoming increasingly rushed and “fragmented” (Bauman, 1999, p.38; Sennett, 1999, pp.20-24, p.99).

Today, we are “imprisoned in the era of speed. […] During that time, *homo technologicus* had been harried by the experience of speed: from home to factory, through schools and jobs, forever suffering time scarcity on a tight schedule run by the clock. […] the people we are called to inform are … professionals, self-imprisoned by the certainty that speed encompasses, but needs proper control. It’s speed which matters for them, which matters like the term for the man in jail”[[3]](#footnote-3).

Hence, the organizational, economic, political-institutional, etc. dimensions of contemporary lives are pervaded by the will and the pretension to optimize and control all that we do, accompanied by the feeling that we never have enough time.

The French philosopher Paul Virilio (2006) has argued that our society is dominated by the dictatorship of speed, which is based on the principle: “if time is money, speed is power”. A similar view has been put forward by German sociologist Hartmut Rosa (2015), who has proposed the concept of “social acceleration”, understood as that typically Western phenomenon whereby the speed made possible by technology is transferred to every aspect of our social lives.

This places the contemporary individual adult in a permanent state of anxiety and relativism given that all truths, certainties, beliefs etc. are destined to disappear, squashed out of existence by a consumer society whose sole aim is to enjoy the present moment. Bauman (2012) states: “Give up all hope of totality, whether future or past, all you who enter liquid modernity”.

**Being adults today**

Within the dominant performative narrative of the “culture of the present moment” and the “rush culture” which taken together undermine the most intimate dimensions of personality and behaviour, it is imperative to enjoy the here and now, viewed as the only possible antidote to emptiness and boredom (Kimura, 2005), as well as uncertainty. The adult who is immersed in this “chaotic ecstasy”, experiences time as present (Bauman, 1999, p.36, 2003; Sennett, 1999, pp.20-24, p.99), with no yesterday or tomorrow, lacking in depth. Hence, there is no time for “sedimentation” or “re-elaboration” of events (Jedlowski, 2002, p.38) nor time for welcoming and cultivating plans (Bauman, 1999, 2003; Benasayag, 2005; Sennett, 1999). Life is based on the “instantaneous”.

The life stories of adult individuals appear to be emptied of diachronic identity, that is to say, continuity, as well as lacking in narrative identity based on inner dialogue (Stanghellini, 1997).

This seems to be the official narrative – earlier alluded to – in which we are immersed and which tells our story.

And in all of this, what is the relevance of playing games? And what has play got to do with the theme of this conference?

Before answering this question, let us first take a brief look at the phenomenology of play and games.

**Adulthood and play**

Man has always engaged in play; games have always offered a privileged and protected ground to men and women of all historical periods and ages: modes of play may have changed, some playthings may have changed, yet play is just as crucial for human beings today as it was in ancient times. There is nothing negative in our encounter with play.

Play would appear to be in contrast with work, as an activity that is both entertaining and relaxing, and which individuals can engage in as they want, for social rather than for economic gain.

Hence playing games is a human activity that is a source of great pleasure, amusement and gratification. On this theme Roger Caillois (2013) has observed that:

“The word play inevitably implies an atmosphere of relaxation or enjoyment, it evokes an activity that is not subject to constructions, but which also lacks real-life consequences […] at each new repetition of a game, even if they were to go on playing it for their whole lives, the players would encounter the same conditions as the first time. This fundamental gratuitousness of play is precisely the factor that most greatly detracts from its status. And at the same time, it is the factor that allows us to engage in play with the utmost carefreeness and that keeps it separate from productive activity. Play has no outcomes in real life.” (p.5).

Play appears to be a sort of interlude that allows adults to take a break from their work, transporting them into a dimension of carefreeness and freedom with respect to their usual commitments, both personal and professional, thereby becoming a real need for the human being:

“Play is a complex human activity. It involves freely engaging in psychic, physical and intellectual activity that caters for a primordial, organic and psychological need. It can take an infinite number of forms: it serves as training for the various tasks of existence at the biological, social and cultural levels; it meets the need for control, domination, and self-affirmation through meeting challenges; it is a source of leisure and self-gratification” (Carlevaro, 2002).

The crucial role of play in human existence also has to do with the fact that it frees subjects’ minds from external influences, bringing to the fore their most instinctive, emotional and intimate dimension, given that “Man … is only fully a human being when he plays” (Friedrich, 1975).

Although play may be viewed as unproductive and without real-life consequences, at the imaginary level it functions as a sort of training for dealing with the risks and unpredictability of society, hence representing a primary need: “You can deny, if you like, nearly all abstractions: justice, beauty, truth, goodness, mind, God. You can deny seriousness, but not play.” (Huizinga, 2014).

This is particularly true of play that is not purely intentional and structured (such as “board games”), but which takes the form of a metaphorical place of experimentation with the self, exchange with the other and socialization.

In Caillois’ view, play is an activity that is freely engaged in, limited only by the rules of the game; it is isolated from the surrounding context because it originates and is carried out within spatial and temporal boundaries that are agreed from the outset; play is uncertain in that it is possible to be the loser; it is unproductive in that it does not produce wealth; it is regulated by ad hoc rules; and finally, it is fictitious and unreal in that it bears no real-life implications.

Huinzinga, in “Homo ludens” (2002), draws on his anthropological studies of play and ritual to argue that play, far from being marginal to culture, is actually a cultural antecedent. If we view culture as a markedly human characteristic, since animals too engage in play, play must necessarily precede culture. To back up this argument, Huizinga analysed what he refers to as the “great archetypal activities of human society”, that is to say, primary categories such as language, myth and religious worship, noting how these are woven into play:

“In the making of speech and language the spirit is continually sparking between matter and mind, as it were. […] Behind every abstract expression, there lie the boldest of metaphors, and every metaphor is a play on words. Thus in giving expression to life, man creates a second poetic world alongside the world of nature. Or take myth. This too is a transformation of the outer world, only here the process is more elaborate and ornate than is the case with individual words. Primitive man seeks to account for the world of phenomena […] In all the wild imaginings […] a fanciful spirit is playing on the borderline between jest and earnest. Or finally let us take ritual. Primitive society performs its sacred rites […] in a spirit of pure play truly understood” (p.7).

On this basis, Huizinga feels justified in adding to *homo*, in addition to the labels *sapiens* and *faber*, also *ludens,* in reference to the crucial role of play in the birth of culture and society.

Play still today fulfils both an essential biological function and a critical social purpose in terms of contributing to establishing and maintaining bonds between individuals. Culture and play represent a place in which it is possible to detach from real everyday life, a space in which to interpret, re-elaborate and signify experience.

Huizinga also proposed that in different human societies, play takes different forms and is engaged in for different purposes: as sacred ritual, as a medium for learning, or as a creative process underpinning poetic, graphic or musical expression, and so on.

He also emphasizes the importance of rules in defining the boundaries of the game. These rules are typically inflexible and must be closely followed in order to temporarily create an imaginary micro-world. Fairness is thus a key requirement which cannot be violated in order to maintain the illusion on which play is based, without revealing the game’s intrinsic fragility.

This early and rich reflection on play by Huinzinga paved the way for other authors such as Eugen Fink who, in 1957, published his “Oasi del gioco”, in which he proposed that play is generally accepted in human societies but accorded marginal status.

The entertaining and light side to play was also acknowledged and explored by Fink, who viewed play as a space for detaching from the seriousness and responsability of life:

“As long as we […] continue naively using the popular antitheses of ‘work-play’, ‘frivolity-seriousness’ and the like, we will never grasp the ontological meaning of play […] it is considered to be something non-serious, non-obligatory, and inauthentic, to be caprice and idleness” (p.10)

Adults who play more than is conventionally deemed normal are seen as immature and childish and thought to be evading real-life issues. Fink argued that: “…il gioco adulto è sottoposto alla pressione costante di un compatto dispositivo dequalificante…”, even though it is a key existential phenomenon that is an end in itself. In Fink’s view, all human action is underpinned by the desire to achieve eudaimonia[[4]](#footnote-4), by constantly searching for meaning, as we make our way along our path towards a happy future, for which we perceive the present as the time in which to prepare and plan; play – on the other hand – transcends this logic:

“In relation to the course of life and to its restless dynamic, to its obscure questionworthiness and its forward-rushing orientation towards the future, playing has the character of a pacified present and self-contained sense - it resembles an oasis of happiness that we happen on in the desert of our […] pursuit of happiness” (pp.17-18).

This statement implies that the purpose of play is not to ensure a happy future but is contained in itself. Hence play is a standalone practice that strengthens our ties with the present. According to Fink, play cannot be compared or contrasted with the phenomena of our daily lives, but receives, represents and reinterprets them.

**Alea and Agon**

Another scholar of play, Gregory Bateson, defined it as a form of meta-communication, given its power to attribute figurative and symbolic, as opposed to literal, meaning to our actions and words, thereby taking fiction to a higher level than reality and viewing it as something that already exists as latent potential.

Returning once more to the work of Caillois, particularly “Homo Ludens” (1958), play may be divided into two opposite and antagonistic categories: *Paidia* and *Ludus*. Paidia is play that is spontaneous, free, chaotic and anarchic, while Ludus is based on institutionalized rule, and the object of participation is to overcome an obstacle that has been deliberately created for the purposes of the game.

Caillois proposes dividing games into two further categories: *Alea* and *Agon.*

*Alea* is a Latin word whose literal translation is told: it describes games whose outcome does not depend on the skill of the player but exclusively on chance. Hence, one’s opponent is not another player but destiny: players only need to wait to find out what fate has decided for them.

This category includes games that are highly passive in nature, in which competence has no bearing on the result: for example, roulette, lotteries and scratchcards.

Alea contrasts with the games in the *Agon* category, which require players to participate responsibly and draw on different kinds of ability, and whose categorical imperative is precisely that of *not* abandoning oneself to one’s fate. Agon demands patience, concentration, constant training and the subject’s will to determine, insofar as possible, the outcome of the game.

In sum, Alea involves waiting for Fate to decide on and execute its moves, while Agon exalts and leads us to exercise, and put to the test, our own physical and/or mental skills, encouraging perseverance and preparation.

There are games however in which Alea and Agon are both present, giving rise to a third category, in which the human player is both a passive subject waiting to know his or her fate and at the same time called to actively prepare, participate, and attempt to overcome difficulties; such games demand both luck and skill, which contribute to the final outcome in equal measures (Caillois, 2013).

**Narrative and counter-narrative**

As we have just seen, the dimension of play is of key importance to the demanding adult lives of today. Nevertheless, we need to be aware of another side to play, the dangerous side, that poses risks for adults who engage in it and can even become a form of illness: gambling.

“if one’s encounter with an object is fatal and therefore transformational, it may be defined, according to how the encounter develops, as a ‘drug object’ or ‘object of passion’” (Bignamini, 2006).

Gambling is an exciting form of entertainment that provides a diversion from everyday life; however it also represents the illusion of change and players’ lack of confidence in their ability to be effective in their lives. The illusion of easy winnings and overinvestment in gambling leads subjects to lose their awareness that they are certain to lose. It is no coincidence that in periods of economic recession and depression, when consumption is slow and traditional economic sectors contract, the gambling market flourishes: governments anxious to boost tax revenue frequently contribute to this state of affairs by promoting gambling and thereby selling dreams to their most “hopeless” citizens (Fiasco, 2001).

In the contemporary social context described in the introdution to this paper, gambling in all its forms finds fertile ground. It does not require any determination, effort, practice, responsibility or skill, and so individuals passively pin their hopes on it, on the mirage of a sudden stroke of good luck, of magically finding themselves in the lap of luxury and wealth, without any struggle to achieve it.

Gambling makes the contemporary dream par excellence seem attainable, if only for an instant – the dream, that is to say, of obtaining the maximum benefit with the minimum sacrifice, giving the player the illusion of being highly effective.

This illusory contemporary narrative of “access to everything” and “everything at once” that “speaks to us” and “acts in us” (Bauman, 2012) contains a sub-narrative – fuelled by advertising and other communication media – that frames gambling as an opportunity to make one’s fortune and be successful without the need for effort or sacrifice. However, these same media – in a form of narrative schizophrenia, demonize gambling, warning adults and youth – its potential consumers – against its dangers.

Against this backdrop of narrative paradoxes, the phenomenon of gambling has become increasingly widespread over the past ten years, with increases in both the number of gaming halls and levels of Internet gambling. This has had negative side-effects at the social level, causing addiction and leading gamblers into debt. The all-pervasiveness and appeal of gambling makes it difficult for individuals to give it up.

Hence, we believe it to be of vital importance that this counter-narrative be brought to the fore so that it may become one of the “discourses we live by”, prompting adults to re-turn to playing games in the sense of re-discovering the re-creational and positive functions of play, and helping them to identify new forms of play for entertainment, relaxation and socialization purposes.

**Educational narrative in care with an educational component**

Gambling addiction is an illness and as such must be treated via appropriate rehabilitation and educational programmes.

In Italy, SerT and Giocatori Anonimi (Gamblers Anonymous) are two organizations that play a key role in educating adults to rediscover the positive aspects of playing games.

SerT was set up by local health boards as the main public health service offering recovery programmes for those affected by legal (e.g., alcohol) and illegal (e.g., cocaine, heroin) substance abuse/addiction and compulsive behaviours.

In recent years, this service – where present – has also begun to work with individuals who are pathologically addicted to gambling even in the absence of an addiction to substances.

There are currently 550 SerTs in operation in Italy, on average one per health district.

SerTs guarantee anonymity to their clients, but in the case of minors, parents or guardians must be involved. No medical prescription is required to avail of the service which is totally free of cost. The service is offered on the same conditions to both Italian citizens and foreign residents who are members of the national health service.

SerTs employ a range of specialists with expertise in the treatment of addictions, such as doctors, nurses, professional educators, psychologists and social workers, who after fully evaluating the client’s physical and mental health, define individual courses of therapy and monitor them periodically according to both medical and psychological criteria.

A course of therapy offered by a SerT has a defined start and finish date. The SerT team agrees a timeframe with the client, in the space of which it should be possible for the patient to come to terms with his or her addiction and learn how to cope with it.

Hence, the service’s goal is to help subjects to overcome their addiction by enabling them to deal with it independently, without creating a further form of dependence whereby they begin to rely on the support of the service, but simply offering them tools for breaking their compulsive habits.

G.A. is a fellowship of men and women who have issues with compulsive gambling and who share their experience and strength with one another with a view to solving their common problem and helping others to recover from a gambling problem. Members of Gamblers Anonymous commit to going on sharing their experience and feelings with their group even when they have achieved “sobriety”, to reduce their risk of having a relapse and to provide support to new members and those who are still struggling with their gambling issues.

The recovery programme offered by G.A. is more educational than clinical in nature and is based on narrative educational tools.

The Association follows the model of the self-help group that has been successfully applied by its parent organization in the US.

G.A. has developed a 20-item questionnaire (see FIG. I) that can help gamblers to discern if their addiction is such that they should ask the association for help. This self-report instrument is simple and quick to complete, and a gambler may respond to the items unassisted, anonymously and in the privacy of his or her own home.

|  |
| --- |
| 1. Have you ever lost time from school or work due to gambling?
2. Has gambling ever made your home life unhappy?
3. Has gambling damaged your reputation?
4. Have you ever felt remorse after gambling?
5. Did you ever gamble to get money with which to solve financial difficulties?
6. Has gambling caused a decrease in your ambition?
7. After losing do you feel you must return as soon as possible and win back your losses?
8. After winning do you have a strong urge to return and win more?
9. Have you ever gambled until your last euro was gone?
10. Have you ever borrowed to finance your gambling?
11. Have you ever sold anything to finance your gambling?
12. Have you ever been reluctant to use gambling money for other expenditures?
13. Has gambling made you careless about the welfare of yourself or your family?
14. Have you ever gambled for longer than you had planned?
15. Have you ever gambled to get away from worries or difficulties?
16. Have you ever committed or considered committing an illegal act to finance gambling?
17. Has gambling ever caused you to have difficulty sleeping?
18. Have disappointments or frustrations ever given you the urge to gamble?
19. Have you ever felt the urge to celebrate any good fortune by a few hours of gambling?
20. Have you ever considered suicide as a result of your gambling?
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FIG. I: Questionnaire administered anonymously to gamblers (available at <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/> www.giocatori.org)

Statistical evidence indicates that educational programmes based on the self-help model that allow participants orally share and compare their self-narratives and personal experience can be highly effective. Such an approach ensures that the individual gambler does not feel judged by the other members of the group, whose experience is similar and who can therefore understand the associated problems and challenges.

This narrative dispositive helps members to tell their own individual stories and the consequences that addiction has had on their private and professional lives. They are encouraged to focus on their strengths and on the strategies that they can deploy to deal with their gambling problem. Another aspect that helps participants to open up and share their stories with the group is the fact that their privacy and anonymity is guaranteed.

Ultimately what emerges is a joint narrative that offers new perspectives on the self and on the experience of gambling/gaming/playing games in adulthood: a sort of counter-narrative that stands as an alternative to official narratives which are reified in ways that are ambivalent and therefore anti-educational.

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1. Assistant Professor in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Assistant Lecturer in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paper delivered on 8 November 1996 at the Netherlands Design Institute of Amsterdam. Published by the Rivista Libertaria, anno 3, n.4, dicembre 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Term used by the ancient Greeks to refer to happiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)