

Discourses We Live By

Narratives of Educational
and Social Endeavour

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12. What Game Are We Playing? Narrative Work that Supports Gamblers

Micaela Castiglioni and Carola Girotti

Micaela Castiglioni and Carola Girotti place the official narrative and counter-narrative of gambling in the broader context of modern-day society and adult play before describing two Italian initiatives to support gamblers to shed their addiction, through psychosocial means. One of these, the self-help Gamblers Anonymous group, particularly uses narrative approaches to help members publicly tell and re-frame their own life stories in order to see themselves differently and therefore to resist a return to addiction.

This chapter examines one of the dominant narratives in which we are immersed, one 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 serves the logic of the market and to the consequent commercialization of all that belongs to 'the human'. The ground is ripe to sideline the alternative, the unique and diverse narratives of individual adults who each bear specific needs, anxieties, fears, fragilities, etc., born precisely of the constant mutability to which today's personal and professional lives are subject. Are these 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 risky behaviours.

In this complex and problematic scenario, among the types of experience that receive inadequate attention is that of playing games in adulthood, particularly the phenomenon of gambling that has become increasingly widespread over the past ten years, its all-pervasiveness and appeal making it difficult for individuals to give it up. This chapter establishes a framework through which to consider forms of adult play and explores both the official narrative of gambling — what John (2017, p. 4) terms a shared ‘set of values’ that is often a ‘constitutive activity of social media’ in contemporary society — and its more invidious counter-narrative that is rarely foregrounded.

In What Place and in What Timeframe?

The current political-economic-institutional and sociocultural contexts are 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, 2000/1999; 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 (Bauman, 2000/1999, 2003; Sennett, 1999). The bonds among individuals are fluid and inconsistent; there is a lack of sharing, concern, respectful recognition and emotional investment, and relationships dominated by consumerism (Bauman, 2000/1999) are mainly aimed at instrumentally achieving personal gain over the short term (*ibid.*).

Time and space have also been affected (Giddens, 1990) in that traditional spaces are being taken over by other spaces. Giddens (*ibid.*, p. 18) 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.

Similarly, our experience of time is being impacted by the availability of rapid and long-distance virtual connections (Bauman, 2000/1999; Giddens, 1990) 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 (Sennett, 1999; Bauman, 2000/1999). Like Illich (1996), we see ourselves 'imprisoned in the age of speed' and 'harried' by the experience of it, and when talking with professionals find that they too are 'self-imprisoned by the certainty that speed encompasses everything' not always remembering that it 'needs proper control'.¹ Hence, the organizational, economic, political-institutional 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 (2008)², in Armitage & Bishop, 2013, p. 204) 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 was put forward by German sociologist Hartmut Rosa³ (see Rosa, 2013), 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, and beliefs are destined to disappear, squashed out of existence by a consumer society whose sole aim is to enjoy the present moment. Bauman (2000/1999, p. 22) states: 'Abandon all hope of totality, future as well as past, you who enter the world of fluid modernity'.

1 Paper delivered on 8 November 1996 at Doors of Perception, Netherlands Design Institute of Amsterdam in a session on 'Speed? What speed?' with Sebastian Trapp and Matthias Rieger. Later published in J. Millar & M. Schwarz (eds) (1998). *Speed: Visions of an accelerated age*. London: Photographers' Gallery.

2 In 'Itineraries of the Catastrophe', an interview with Sylvère Lotringer.

3 Coined in German in 2005, as *Beschleunigung*, later translated as *social acceleration*.

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’ (Bauman, 2000/1999) experiences time as present (Sennett, 1999), 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, 2000/1999, 2003; 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 — alluded to earlier — 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 discourse? Before answering these questions, 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.⁴ 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

4 Play is much written about and here we draw on Italian versions of the classic works of Johan Huizinga (originally publishing in Dutch in 1938, in English in 1949 and later, Italian in 1946/2013); of Eugene Fink (a German, publishing originally in 1957, in Italian in 2008); of Roger Caillois (originally publishing in French in 1958, 1961 in English).

pleasure, amusement and gratification. On this theme Roger Caillois (2013, p. 5) 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.

Play appears to be a sort of interlude that allows adults to take a break from their work, transporting them into a dimension that is carefree and liberated from their usual commitments, both personal and professional, thereby becoming a real need for the human being. It is about activity and Eberle (2014, p. 231) believes that it has 'resisted definition mainly because it is difficult to render dynamic relationships into language'. Nevertheless, after discussing the topic at length with a colleague, Stuart Brown, he offers the following:

Play is an ancient, voluntary, 'emergent' process driven by pleasure that yet strengthens our muscles, instructs our social skills, tempers and deepens our positive emotions, and enables a state of balance that leaves us poised to play some more. (ibid., p. 231)

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 it represents 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, 2014/1938). 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' (2013, originally 1958) 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.

Huizinga, in *Homo Ludens* (2002 edition), 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. (ibid., 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 that 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 Huizinga 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. Acknowledging its entertaining and light side, Fink (1968)⁵ viewed play as a space for detaching from the seriousness and responsibility of life. He admits that:

Play is thought of more or less as frivolous and pleasurable nonsense, as a carefree sojourn in the airy realm of phantasy and sheer potentialities, as an escape from unyielding reality to a dream-utopia. [...] 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. (p. 19)

But argues that: 'play is a basic existential phenomenon' (p. 19) that 'is not subordinate to the ultimate purpose served by all other human activity' (p. 21) and that if we try to make it so it is 'perverted and has become merely a means to an end' (p. 21).

In Fink's view, all human action is underpinned by the desire to achieve *eudaimonia* (Greek for happiness), 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 contrast with the restless dynamism, the obscure ambiguity and relentless futurism of our life, play is characterized by calm, timeless 'presence' and autonomous, self-sufficient meaning — play resembles an oasis of happiness that we happen upon in the desert of our Tantalus-like seeking and pursuit of happiness. (p. 21)

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. Another scholar of play,

5 Fink's 1957 work was translated by Ute and Thomas Saine and published by Yale University Press, see Fink, Saine & Saine (1968) in reference list for this chapter.

Gregory Bateson (1987) 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.

Alea and Agon

Returning once more to the work of Caillois (of 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 also divided games into further categories, of which *Alea* and *Agon* are relevant here.

Alea 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 scratch cards. *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.⁶

6 This paragraph is attributed to Carola Girotti, Assistant Lecturer in Adult Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy.

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 at the start of this chapter, 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 young people — its potential consumers — against its dangers.

Against this backdrop, the phenomenon of gambling has become increasingly widespread over the past ten years, with increases in both the number of gaming halls and the 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. And consequently, to re-discover and re-signify their own adult identities, thereby recovering their sense of self and self-esteem.

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, GA) 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

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 SerT in operation in Italy, on average one per health district. SerT guarantee anonymity to their clients, but in the case of minors, parents or guardians must

be involved. No medical prescription is required to avail oneself 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. SerT 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 that might help them to break their compulsive habits.

Giocatori Anonimi (Gamblers Anonymous, GA)

GA 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 GA commit to continue to share their experiences 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 GA 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 the original American organization. GA has developed a twenty-item questionnaire (see below) that can help gamblers to discern if their addiction is such that they should ask the association for help.⁷ This self-report instrument is simple and quick to complete, and a gambler

7 For online questionnaires visit <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/> or www.giocatorianonimi.org

may respond to the items unassisted, anonymously and in the privacy of his or her own home.

The GA Questionnaire

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?

Author translation of questionnaire freely available @ www.giocatori.anonimi.org

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

Narrating a Counter-History

We wish to emphasize the importance of narrative research in shaping, containing and communicating meaning, not only in relation to the focus of this chapter but relative to all the themes addressed throughout the volume. Specifically, it is our aim to draw attention to the educational value and care inherent in the narrative healthcare outlined above.

Each of us, from the earliest months of life, internalizes a 'script' (Berne, 2001/1961) that is functional to ensuring our survival. The newborn baby discovers that crying elicits the intervention of its carers to alleviate its suffering, and thereafter continues to have recourse to this strategy every time it finds itself in need. This script is pre-verbal, pre-narrative and, we might say, a successful and 'adaptive' script that is generated in the encounter between stimuli internal to the child and stimuli from the external environment (Cosso, 2013). Later, speech will replace crying, but as the child grows he or she will continue to draw on scripts, though these will gradually increase in number and complexity (ibid.). 'Adaptive' scripts will be weighed up against 'transgressive' scripts, as Bruner (1992) called them, which may also be understood as emancipatory scripts: particularly during all the key transitions, foreseen and unforeseen, that we will go through in the course of our life trajectories (Cosso, 2013).

From an epistemological perspective closer to that informing this book, which draws on the structuralism of Foucault and narrative psychodynamics, we might say that narratives that are official, dominant, authoritative and collective — but not on this account intrinsically or automatically endowed with real or tolerable meaning (Pineau & Le Grand, 1993) — must necessarily encounter, and frequently clash with, the original and generative narratives of which each individual is the more or less conscious bearer. If this fails to occur, the subject will end up being excessively narrated by 'other discourses' and the 'discourses of others' (ibid.) in the form of beliefs, values, viewpoints and even ambivalent and manipulative discourses. As we have seen in relation to gambling, failure in this regard will lead to the loss of self, understood as the loss of oneself and of one's deepest and most personal sense of self.

As is so well expressed by Foucault in *The Order of Things* (1967), discourse is driven by power yet itself exercises a form of power that may

be either coercive or emancipatory. According to the French philosopher, the subject is 'spoken' by discursive practices situated within specific political-institutional and socio-cultural paradigms or systems. These discursive practices determine whether factors that limit and/or afford possibilities to the subject are 'speakable' or 'unspeakable'. This is why, in situations of vulnerability bordering on full-blown mental illness, such as forms of gambling addiction, the individual needs to have access to educational approaches of the narrative kind, which prioritize narrative, using it to facilitate the co-construction — with a practitioner or group — of a counter-narrative or counter-history. This will allow the individual to recompose his or her life story and to deviate from a previously internalized and excessively inflexible script of self that rhetorically reflected the requirements of the external social context. Within this newly defined life trajectory, play will remain a key source of liberation, gratification, and regeneration but will imply the acceptance of responsibility for self and others and compliance with the rules.

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