



LESSON PLAN

Level:	Grades 9 to 10
About the Author:	Matthew Johnson, Director of Education, MediaSmarts
Duration:	2 hours

Gambling in the Media



This lesson is part of USE, UNDERSTAND & ENGAGE: A Digital Media Literacy Framework for Canadian Schools: <http://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework>.

Overview

This two-day lesson looks at the increasing prominence of gambling in the media, particularly movies and television. Students are asked to look critically at how gambling is portrayed, in comparison to its reality, and to consider how that portrayal affects how people perceive the risks and rewards of gambling.

Learning Outcomes

Students will demonstrate the ability to:

- make and test hypotheses
- consider the role of the media in influencing perceptions
- consider the role of commercial factors in influencing media creation
- read an article and answer comprehension questions
- argue and support an opinion

Preparation and Materials

Read the following backgrounder:

- *Gambling and Youth: An Overview for Teachers and Parents*

Photocopy the following handouts:

- *What are the Odds?*
- *Gambling in the Movies*
- *Making Poker a Sport*



Procedure

What are the odds?

Distribute the handout *What are the Odds?* Explain to students that you are looking at how we perceive risk and chance – which events are more likely to occur, and which are less likely? Read through the list of events and then have students guess what the odds are for each one, matching the event to one of the percentages in the right-hand column. Allow about five minutes for this activity and then provide answers from the answer key.

Discuss with the class: which events were less likely than they had thought? Which events were more likely to occur? Some events that will probably be less likely than expected are the chances of someone being murdered in Canada (0.000176%) and the chances of winning a lottery jackpot (0.000000625%). Contrast these with the odds of getting “heads” ten times in a row: 0.0098%, much more likely than either. Some events that will probably be more likely than expected are having two people in a group of 30 with the same birthday (70%) and a Canadian teen being a problem gambler (4%).

Problem gambling

Ask students what they think is meant by the term *problem gambler*. Points that are likely to be raised are that a problem gambler cannot control how much time she/he spends gambling, how much money she/he spends, and the effects of gambling on his/her life.

Point out to students that 4% is just under one in twenty. If the classroom is a typical sample, how many problem gamblers are there likely to be? (One, with a roughly fifty per cent chance of another in a thirty person class.)

Gambling in the movies

Distribute the handout *Gambling in the Movies*. Read through the introductory text and the movie summaries and have students try to guess in each case whether the movie had a happy ending and what view of gambling is portrayed. Allow about five minutes for the students to make their guesses and then discuss them as a class:

- *Rounders*: happy ending, gambling as skill (master poker player wins big)
- *Rain Man*: happy ending, gambling as skill (savant uses mathematical skill to win big)
- *Hard Eight*: unhappy ending, gambling as luck (gambler thinks he has an edge but loses big)
- *The Cooler*: happy ending, gambling as luck (gambler’s luck turns against him, but he’s okay in the end)
- *21*: happy ending, gambling as skill (students use mathematical skills to win big)
- *Mississippi Grind*: unhappy ending, gambling as luck (gambler’s luck turns around, but he still isn’t happy)

A pattern will quickly emerge: the movies that had happy endings made much more money than the one movie that didn’t – no surprise there – but the movies that portrayed gambling as a skill did much better commercially than those that portrayed it as luck. Even in the case of *The Cooler*, “luck” is portrayed as an absolute characteristic – a person is either lucky or unlucky – rather than realistically. On the whole, then, movies are more likely to portray gambling as a matter of luck and to show gambling stories having happy endings and doing both of these improves their performance at the box office.



(A particularly perceptive student might suggest that you're mixing apples and oranges: *Hard Eight* was an independent movie and its director's first feature, whereas *Rounders* and *21* were big studio films. If so you can admit that that is true, but that it further proves the point: *Hard Eight* was chosen as an example because there are *no* big studio films made in the last thirty years that show gambling as a matter of luck, in a realistic way.)

Gambling in the media

Discuss with the class why this view of gambling might be so powerful. Points that might be raised include that movies are in the business of selling fantasy, not reality, and that a movie is more exciting if its action is seen as being determined by skill and not luck.

Two points you should be careful to raise if the students do not:

We tend to see luck as a personal characteristic. Ask the students how many believe that some people are lucky and some are just unlucky (as suggested by *The Cooler*). Many, if not most, will likely raise their hands. Point out that this is untrue: we think that way because in any random system unlikely events or series will happen occasionally (point out how ten coin flips of "heads" in a row was one of the more likely events on the list) and we also selectively remember and forget events to fit our perceptions (so a person who considers herself "unlucky" will remember unfortunate events and forget or ignore more fortunate ones.)

Good luck is seen as a sign of good character. Heroes of Westerns in the days of John Wayne and Gary Cooper were always expert gamblers, a pattern that was followed by movie heroes like James Bond (who gambles in almost all of his films, and always wins) and Han Solo (who won his ship the *Millennium Falcon* in a card game.) Even Bugs Bunny is shown as a master gambler, winning a game of blackjack with just one card!

Ask students if they can think of an example where a movie or TV hero has been shown winning at gambling, or simply being very lucky. Ask if they can think of an example of the reverse.

Close the discussion by asking what the students think might be the effect of this portrayal of gambling. Does seeing gambling portrayed as a matter of skill, or believing that some people are luckier than others, affect how we see gambling in real life? Why or why not? (There's no need to draw a conclusion from this part of the discussion, you're just raising issues that will be touched on in the next section.)

Gambling as a sport

Ask students if they have ever watched poker on television (some hands will likely go up.) Ask how many know anyone who plays poker online (mention that they don't have to say who – several hands will probably go up.) Ask if they know anyone whom they think may be a problem gambler (probably no hands will go up.)

Distribute the handout *Making Poker a Sport*. Have students read the article and answer the questions. (You may wish to have them just make notes on the final question, then assign the full paragraph as homework.)

Discuss the last question: Is poker a sport? Should it be broadcasted as one? Does portraying poker as a sport encourage young people to gamble?



Evaluation

Students may be evaluated on their paragraph answer to question number 4.

Extension

Possibilities for extending this lesson:

1. You may choose to have students write a full-length essay on topics including televising gambling, treating gambling as a sport, or portrayal of gambling in the media.
2. You may choose to organize a debate in which the main issues raised in the lesson are argued.
3. You may choose to have students research portrayals of gambling in movies outside of the examples given. Does the same pattern hold true with a larger sample? Has gambling been portrayed differently at different times?
4. You may choose to have students outline a movie in which gambling and luck are portrayed realistically. Is it possible to do this and still create an entertaining movie?



Gambling and youth: an overview for teachers and parents

Serious research into youth gambling online is just beginning, but some things are already clear: young people are gambling online. Many are doing so using real money. And some are becoming problem gamblers.

MediaSmarts' research has found that about one in five Canadian kids between the ages of nine and 17 play casino or gambling games online.¹ Jon Kelly, CEO of Ontario's Responsible Gambling Council, says that gambling is highly prominent in youth culture: "Even kids as young as nine years are learning about gambling. They may not be gambling with money, but they're learning concepts of gambling."²

"Social casino" apps and sites, where you can't win money, are really no safer than pay sites. To begin with, they often use many of the same techniques to get you to keep spending money, like encouraging you to buy chips so you can keep playing or rewarding big spenders with perks and memberships in special clubs. Practice sites serve to train young people to gamble by providing all of the excitement and rewards with none of the costs. According to Dr. Lawson Bernstein, a neuropsychiatrist and expert on gambling addiction, "The biochemical changes in the brain associated with gambling are not dissimilar to the biochemical effects of drugs of abuse such as cocaine." In some people it will engender a high, and they'll start to chase that high."³

Moreover, practice sites give young people a distorted view of gambling. First, because they only involve "play money," there is no cost to winning. As well, practice sites typically have a higher pay-out rate than pay sites.⁴ Most importantly, the sites – which are frequently advertised on TV – introduce young people to electronic gambling, which is generally considered to be the most addictive form of gambling due to the instant rewards, the isolation and the lack of time limits.⁵

Unfortunately, gambling is particularly bad for young people, who are more likely than adults to become problem gamblers. According to Jeff Devernsky, director of the International Center for Youth Gambling, teenagers "perceive themselves as invincible and invulnerable. They tend not to have the responsibility that adults do and don't have to provide for their families and as a result are much more likely to engage in this behavior."⁶

Besides being more at risk of becoming problem gamblers, young people are more likely to suffer the negative consequences of problem gambling. Mark Potenza, associate professor of psychiatry at the Yale University School of Medicine, found that "adolescent gamblers were more likely to report problems with alcohol and drug use and more likely to report depression."⁷

Young people also encounter gambling-like features in video games. Loot boxes and similar in-game purchases give a random chance of winning different items, with some being more common and some extremely rare and valuable. Because 80 percent of all games revenue comes from free-to-play games,⁸ games companies work hard to get players to keep spending money, and gambling-like features are one of the best ways of doing that. Just like with gambling, games make most of their money from big-spending "whales." Half of all the money spend on loot boxes is spent by just five percent of players.⁸

1 Brisson-Boivin, K. (2022) *Young Canadians in a Wireless World, Phase IV: Life Online*.

2 Online gambling snagging children as young as 9. CBC News, April 6 2006

3 Vegas, Baby: TV Bets on Gambling. Fox News, January 12 2004

4 Jessica McBride, BA, BSc. Internet Gambling Among Youth: A Preliminary Examination. International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviors

5 Online Gambling and Youth. Problem Gambling Prevention. http://www.co.lane.or.us/prevention/gambling/youth_online.htm

6 Logging On And Losing Out: Dealing Addiction to America's Kids. American Radio Works. <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/gambling/d2.html>

7 Ibid

8 Kersley, A. (2021) Loot boxes are dead. What comes next will be worse. *Wired*. Retrieved from <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/loot-boxes-new-gambling>

9 Close, J., & Lloyd, J. (2020). Lifting the Lid on Loot-Boxes: Chance-Based Purchases in Video Games and the Convergence of Gaming and Gambling. *Gamble Aware*.



What are the Odds?

We often don't have a very good idea how likely or unlikely events or instances occur. Listed below is a list of events that may be more or less likely to happen. Try to match each event to the odds of it happening.

- a. A car being stolen in Columbus, Ohio
- b. Being dealt a full house in five-card draw poker
- c. Being murdered in Canada
- d. Being struck by lightning
- e. Getting "heads" in a single coin flip
- f. Getting "heads" on a coin flip 10 times in a row
- g. Successfully navigating an asteroid field (according to C-3P0)
- h. Two people in a group of 30 sharing a birthday
- i. Winning a Keno jackpot
- j. Winning the jackpot in a typical lottery
- k. A Canadian adult gambling for money in the past year
- l. A Canadian teenager being a problem gambler

Event	Odds
	0.000000625%
	50%
	0.56%
	0.000176%
	75%
	0.000003333333%
	0.003%
	4%
	70%
	0.144%
	0.00011%
	0.0098%



What are the Odds? Answer Key

- a. A car being stolen in Columbus, Ohio: 0.56%
- b. Being dealt a full house: 0.144%
- c. Being murdered in Canada: 0.000176%
- d. Being struck by lightning: 0.000003333333%
- e. Getting “heads” in a single coin flip: 50%
- f. Getting “heads” on a coin-flip 10 times in a row: 0.0098%
- g. Successfully navigating an asteroid field (according to C-3PO): 0.003%
- h. Two people in a group of 30 sharing a birthday: 70%
- i. Winning a Keno jackpot: 0.00011%
- j. Winning the jackpot in a typical lottery: 0.000000625%
- k. A Canadian adult gambling for money in the past year: 75%
- l. A Canadian teenager being a problem gambler: 4%



Gambling in the movies

"Why do you think the same five guys make it to the final table of the World Series of Poker every year? What, are they the luckiest guys in Las Vegas?"

So says Matt Damon's character in the movie *Rounders*, trying to convince his girlfriend to let him enter a huge poker tournament. The only trouble is, he's wrong: over the last twenty years only two players have made it to the World Series of Poker two years in a row. That's because in real life gambling is mostly about luck – but because we're supposed to root for the hero of a movie, gambling is rarely portrayed as being as random as it actually is. Instead it's usually shown as a matter of skill or just plain superiority (James Bond manages to always win at entirely random games like roulette and baccarat). In real life the house always wins in the end, but in most gambling movies the hero gets a happy ending when it counts.

See if you can guess whether each of the gambling movies below had a happy ending or not, and whether it showed gambling as a matter of skill or a matter of luck.

Rounders. A master poker player who tried to retire is lured back to the game in order to pay off a friend's debt. Total box office: \$22,912,409

Happy ending? Luck or skill?

Rain Man. A man takes advantage of his autistic brother's mathematical gifts to beat the odds at Vegas casinos. Total box office: \$172,825,435

Happy ending? Luck or skill?

Hard Eight. A professional gambler takes pity on a loser in a casino and decides to teach him the tricks of the trade. Total box office: \$222,559

Happy ending? Luck or skill?

The Cooler. A losing gambler is kept on staff at a casino because of his amazing ability to end other players' losing streaks – but when his own luck starts to change, his life starts to unravel. Total box office: \$8,291,572

Happy ending? Luck or skill?

21. MIT students use their mathematical skills to beat the odds at Vegas casinos. Total box office: \$69,984,000

Happy ending? Luck or skill?

Mississippi Grind. Gerry, a real-estate broker with large gambling debts, nearly loses everything before winning half a million dollars on a single roll of the dice. Even when he wins, though, he's never happy because he can't stop thinking about how a different bet might have earned him more. Total box office: \$422,746

Happy ending? Luck or skill?



Making poker a sport

One of the biggest trends in sports broadcasting in the last decade has been the explosion in televised poker tournaments. From the *World Poker Tour* to *Celebrity Poker Showdown*, the game has never been more popular as a spectator event, often earning ratings above regular-season basketball games on the American sports network ESPN.

There's just one problem: poker isn't a sport, at least not in the traditional sense. For one thing, it involves little or no physical ability: nobody is going to marvel at the strength or agility of the eyeshade-wearing, coffee-drinking champions of poker. As a result, poker isn't very visually interesting, which for a long time had limited its TV appeal.

Another reason why poker isn't a sport is that it is, at heart, a game of chance. There's a reason why the players considered "stars" often sit out the biggest games – no matter how good you are at poker, in the long run you're no better than the cards you're dealt. Imagine if in baseball the number of players on the field was determined by random chance, or one team in a basketball game might have to play wearing blindfolds. Viewers would quite likely lose patience with sports like these where too much of the outcome rested on obviously random factors. They certainly wouldn't bet on them, a large part of the draw of televised sports.

With those two strikes against it, poker looks like a bad bet for TV. So what happened? According to Steve Lipscomb, the founder of the *World Poker Tour* and the man most responsible for poker's TV success, "If you shot it in a way that made it look like a sport, then it would feel and play like a sport."¹

One way in which Lipscomb did this was to create the whole notion of poker "stars," players who would be featured prominently even if luck meant they didn't wind up in the more important games. Most important, though, was the change in the way the game was filmed: the addition of the "hole card camera," which lets the viewer see the cards each player has face down. By giving the viewer all the game information, it reduces the apparent role of luck and puts the emphasis on the skill each player displays in building a hand, betting and bluffing. It makes poker look like what game theorists call a "game of perfect information," like chess, rather than a game where winning or losing is mostly a matter of what cards you're dealt.

That's how Lipscomb has turned another one of poker's drawbacks – the lack of physical ability required – into a strength: because viewers watch the games with much more information than the players have, it lets them imagine they could do what the players are doing. "We can sit and watch the NBA, and even if they'd let us show up at the all-star game, we'd be humbled and embarrassed. But by learning a little bit, reading a couple of books and watching the *World Poker Tour*, you can show up to a tournament and be dangerous."²

Those two ideas – that poker is a game of skill, and that anyone can be a serious player with a little practice – contradict one another, but that doesn't seem to be a problem for poker's viewers. That is, after all, the essential fantasy of the core sports viewer, the "weekend warrior": that he could make better calls than the ref, plan better strategy than the coach, and that he could play that well *if he wanted to*.

1 "Man Behind Poker's Popularity Reveals His Strategy." Asher Garonzik, McCombs Schools of Business, February 21, 2006.

2 Ibid.



Not everyone is happy with the idea of poker being seen as a sport, though. To begin with, sports are seen in North American culture as an entirely good thing; you will rarely if ever hear a father say that he's worried his son is playing too much hockey. Calling poker a sport, then, wipes away many of the concerns that go along with gambling. Like other sports it becomes a glamorous activity and its stars become heroes and role models to youth. A Ryerson University student described his view of the professional poker player's life this way: "You make money and all you do is play cards. And make millions of dollars."³

As noted above, part of the transformation from game to sport involves playing down the role of luck and emphasizing the role of skill. The way poker is televised, with viewers having access to information the players don't, encourages viewers to overestimate their own skills. This might not be a problem if young people didn't have access to opportunities to play poker for money – but they do, and increasingly they are, online. According to Peter Roby, director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University, "A lot of young kids can't make the distinction between what they see on TV and what's happening off TV with online gambling."⁴ The result is that young people are beginning to see online poker as the equivalent of shinny or pickup basketball, a harmless extension of the sports they enjoy watching on TV. The problem is that physical sports aren't addictive, nor are they normally played for money; there certainly isn't a billion-dollar industry dedicated to enticing people to give up their cash in games of street hockey. By making poker look like a sport, Lipscomb and ESPN may instead be encouraging young people to take a chance – with their futures.

Questions

1. What obstacles prevented poker from being considered a sport?
2. How did Lipscomb change how poker was filmed? How were these changes effective in making poker seem more like a sport?
3. How has the public's view of poker changed (especially among young people)? Why do some people consider this a bad thing?
4. Do you think poker should be broadcast as a sport? Why or why not? If so, what would you say to those who feel it's encouraging young people to gamble? If not, what definition of "sport" would you use? Whichever side you take, give your answer in the form of a well-structured paragraph with at least two points in support of your thesis.

3 "Online gambling snagging children as young as 9." CBC News, April 6, 2006.

4 "Popularity of poker begs question: Sport or not?" Mike Dodd, USA Today, April 28, 2006.

