

## VIDEO POKER

Natasha Schüll

**Patsy, a green-eyed brunette** in her mid-forties, began gambling soon after she moved to Las Vegas from California in the 1980s with her husband, a military officer who had been stationed at Nellis Army Base.<sup>1</sup> Video poker machines had been introduced to the local gambling market in the late 1970s, and she discovered them on her trips to the grocery store. "My husband would give me money for food and milk, but I'd get stuck at the machines on the way in, and it would be gone in twenty minutes. . . . I would be gone, too—I'd just zone into the screen and disappear."

Ten years later, Patsy's gambling had progressed to a point where she played video poker machines before work, at lunchtime, on all her breaks, after work, and all weekend long. "My life revolved around the machines," she recalled as we talked outside the Gamblers' Anonymous meeting where we had met, "even the way I ate." Patsy dined with her husband and daughter only when the three met in casinos; she would eat rapidly, then excuse herself to go to the bathroom so that she could gamble. Most often she gambled alone and afterward slept in her van in the parking lot: "I would dream of the machines. I would be punching numbers all night." Eating alone, sleeping alone, Patsy achieved a sort of libidinal autonomy. Her time, her social exchanges, her bodily functions, and even her dreams were organized around gambling. "When I wasn't playing," she told me,

"my whole being was directed to getting back into that zone. It was a machine life."

The French sociologist Roger Caillois, author of *Man, Play, and Games*, believed that games were "cultural clues."<sup>2</sup> One could diagnose a particular civilization, he wrote in 1961, by examining its games. Erving Goffman undertook such a diagnosis in a 1969 study based in Las Vegas, describing gambling activities as the occasion for "character contests" that functioned to maintain social cohesion.<sup>3</sup> In 1974, Clifford Geertz similarly interpreted Balinese cockfight gambling as a "tournament of prestige" that simulated the social matrix, rendering selfhood and social mechanics visible to individual participants.<sup>4</sup>

Caillois, Goffman, and Geertz all referred to slot machine gambling in the course of their analyses: for Caillois, it was an absurd, compulsive form of play in which one could only lose; for Goffman, it was a way for a person lacking social connections "to demonstrate to the other machines that he has socially approved qualities of character"<sup>5</sup>; for Geertz, the gambling machine was a "stupid mechanical crank" offering play that could be of interest only to women, children, the poor, and the despised, and therefore not a properly "sociological entity."<sup>6</sup> The fact machine play has come to drive the American gambling economy prompts me to reconsider these appraisals. Perhaps there is something important taking place that Geertz and his colleagues were not in a position to see.

Although classic green-felt table games or "live games" dominated casino floors as recently as twenty years ago, today profits come primarily from machines, which in residential areas of Las Vegas earn as much as 89 percent of casino revenue—a figure that grows higher still when one considers the machines in gas stations, pharmacies, and supermarkets across the city.<sup>7</sup> At local Gamblers' Anonymous meetings, the vast majority of the participants play video poker exclu-

sively. Robert Hunter, a charismatic Las Vegas psychologist who has carved out a therapeutic niche in the treatment of gambling addiction, has referred to video poker machines as "electronic morphine," "the distilled essence of gambling," and most famously, "the crack cocaine of gambling."<sup>8</sup>

While all contemporary slot machines offer a choice of how many credits to bet on each spin, video poker goes a step further by allowing players to decide which cards—of those they are "dealt" by the machine—they wish to hold or discard in order to make winning hands.<sup>9</sup> As Hunter understands it, the technological interface of video poker so completely concentrates players' attention on a series of specific game events that anything troubling about one's life situation—physically, emotionally, or socially—is blotted out.<sup>10</sup> Unlike Geertz's cockfight, machine gambling is a nonrelational activity in which gamblers enter a dissociative state—a "zone," as they call it—in which a sense of time, space, the value of money, social relations, and even a sense of the body dissolves. "The consistency of the experience that's described by my patients," Hunter told me, "is that of numbness or escape: video players don't talk about excitement—they talk about climbing into the screen and getting lost."

The literature of gambling behavior has hypothesized a qualitative split between *action* gambling and *escape* gambling. Historically, this split has been analyzed in terms of gender dichotomies: men are categorized as action gamblers who prefer live games and women as escape gamblers who prefer machines; men play for sociability, competition, and ego enhancement while women play for isolation and anonymity; men seek thrill, excitement, and sensation while women seek to dull their feelings, escape distressing problems, and relieve themselves of interpersonal interaction.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not these distinctions held true in the past, these days video gambling in Las Vegas is increasingly

seductive to men and women alike. At an average Gamblers' Anonymous meeting 97 percent of those in attendance play only machines, and the gender split is even. A general turn to escape gambling seems to be taking place.

The predicament of compulsive gamblers in Las Vegas, for whom a desire to lose themselves in machines trumps a desire to be selves in the world, can be understood not only as a symptom of gender, genetic predisposition, trauma, or individual life circumstances, but as an index of larger tensions surrounding ideals of individual autonomy in free-market society. It is not my intention to aestheticize or romanticize the plight of compulsive gamblers, but rather, as Jackson Lears puts it in his book on gambling in America, to approach their experience "as a port of entry into a broader territory."<sup>12</sup> I look to the dramatic turn away from social forms of gambling, played at tables, to asocial forms of gambling, played alone at video terminals, for clues to the discontents of today's self. The turn to machine gambling mirrors the spread of consumer technologies like video games, personal computers, and the Internet—technologies, that have given rise to new and intensified forms of human-machine exchange, along with new sets of anxieties for selves, and new forms of self-escape.<sup>13</sup> Here, I parse the escape that Patsy calls "machine life" into its different forms; escape from bodily existence; escape from social exchange; escape from monetary value; escape from chronological time. What about being a self today do compulsive gamblers wish to escape, and how do slot machines become places of refuge?

### The Self as an Enterprise

Since the late 1970s there has come into cultural circulation a model of the self "as a kind of enterprise, seeking to enhance and capitalize on existence itself through calculated acts and investments."<sup>14</sup> This model lends to

selfhood a calculative vocabulary of "incomes, allocations, costs, savings, even profits" by which individuals can engage in a kind of maximizing self-accounting.<sup>15</sup> Nikolas Rose elaborates: "Numbers, and the techniques of calculation in terms of numbers, have a role in subjectification—they turn the individual into a calculating self endowed with a range of ways of thinking about, calculating about, predicting and judging their own activities and those of others."<sup>16</sup>

The movement of financial management technologies into the realm of selfhood does not indicate a new "corruption" of the private by the public. On the contrary, the self has long borrowed its metaphors from enterprise.<sup>17</sup> In today's free-market societies, self-enterprise has become a dominant model of selfhood that Pat O'Malley calls "privatized actuarialism."<sup>18</sup>

*Choice* is key to this reframing of the self; it defines both the field in which actuarial selves operate and their behavioral imperative. Rose, following Anthony Giddens, has put it thus: "Modern individuals are not merely 'free to choose', but *obliged to be free*, to understand and enact their lives in terms of choice."<sup>19</sup> For psychologist Barry Schwartz, upper- and middle-class citizens tend to associate choice with freedom, action, and control while working-class citizens tend to associate choice with fear, doubt, and difficulty. Nevertheless, today in America "the equation of freedom with choice is the one most loudly broadcast."<sup>20</sup>

In his bestselling book, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More Is Less*, Schwartz argues that added options do not necessarily make us better off as a society, as so many economists, policymakers, social scientists, and citizens assume. Too much choice, he contends, can overload, debilitate, and tyrannize.<sup>21</sup> Sifting through an "oppressive abundance" of choice takes up time and energy, causes self-doubt and anxiety, and can multiply occasions for disappointment, regret, and guilt. We are left "feeling barely able to manage" our lives.<sup>22</sup>

Others take his point a step further, arguing that selves burdened by demands for autonomy and responsibility are liable to turn to self-annihilating, self-defeating forms of escape.<sup>23</sup> One might go even further, for it is not simply the demand for autonomy that burdens people but the fact that this demand is quite difficult to realize in a society that protects the welfare of its markets above the welfare of its citizens. Individuals are exhorted to become maximizing virtuosi of the self, but they are not given the material support that would enable them to do so. Even where such support is available, the "ideal self" is by definition never complete, never developed enough. The project is ongoing, driven by a sense of incompleteness.

If lives are caught between the task of optimization and a sense of insufficiency, it is not surprising that there arises a desire for relief. Nor is it surprising that the kind of relief sought is one that distorts and denies the premises of the actuarial self—not necessarily by rejecting these premises but often by taking them to an extreme.

### Self-Liquidation

Physical boundedness—the material basis for selfhood—dissipates in the zone of machine play. Isabella, a real estate agent and single mother, likens her absorption in gambling machines to the way in which the bodies of characters on a science fiction television program are sucked into the screen:

On TV they express it by *pulling*—the bodies actually disappear into the screen and go through the games of the computer. That's what gambling on the machines correlates to: for the time that I was there I wasn't present—I was gone. My body was there, outside the machine, but at the same time I was inside the machine, in the king and

queen turning over, almost hypnotized into *being* that machine.

Like Isabella, an insurance agent named Josie speaks of exiting her body and entering the machine through a kind of pulling: "You go into the screen, it just pulls you in. You're over there in the machine, like you're walking around inside it, going around in the cards."

Absorbed in play, gamblers are apt not to attend to the functioning of their bodies. One regularly found, after sessions of play, that she had unwittingly vomited on herself, and once, that she had wet her pants. Another wore double layered dark blue wool pants so that she could urinate without leaving her machine. Human and machine seem to merge, as an electronics technician named Randall describes: "I get to the point where I no longer realize that my hand is touching the machine, I don't feel it there. I feel connected to the machine when I play, like it's an extension of me, as if physically you couldn't separate me from the machine." Josie remarks: "It's like playing against yourself—you are the machine; the machine is you."

Machines allow gamblers to forge an autonomous, insulated zone of play. Julie, a fundraiser, says "People break the flow and I can't stand it—I have to get up and go to a machine, where nobody holds me back, where there's no interference to stop me. I can have my free rein, go all the way with no obstacles." A blackjack dealer named Sharon says:

In live games you have to take other people into account—other minds making decisions. . . . Like when you're competing for a promotion, you're dealing with other people who decide which one is the best—you can't get into their minds, you can't push their buttons, you can't do anything about it. Just sit back and hope and wait. When

you're on a machine you don't compete against other people.

The "live" world, as Sharon describes it, is a kind of relentless character contest demanding that she "take other people into account" yet providing no clear feedback on which she might base her calculations or hedge her bets. The need to take others into account contrasts with life on the machine, which protects her from the nebulous and risky calculative matrix of social interaction. "At the machines I feel safe, unlike being with a person. [On the machines,] if I lose, that's the end of the relationship. Then it starts again, fresh."

"Nobody really talks to each other when they're playing video poker machines," Patsy tells me, "so just about anywhere you sit you're isolated." Some gamblers select machines in corners or at the end of a row; others place coin cups upside-down on adjacent machines to prevent others from sitting down. "I want to hang a DO NOT DISTURB sign on my back," says Sharon, who has learned to buy a liter of coke and two packs of cigarettes before sitting at the machines so that cocktail waitresses will not interrupt her.

"If you work with people every day," says Josie, "the last thing you want to do is talk to another person when you're free. . . . You want to take a vacation from people. With the machine there's no person that can talk back, no human contact or involvement or communication, just a little square box, a screen." She links the escape of machine play to the taxing social exchange that her job demands:

All day long I have to help people with their finances and their scholarships, help them be responsible. I'm selling insurance, selling investments, I'm taking their money—and I've got to put myself in a position where they will believe what I'm selling is true. After work, I have to go to the machines.

In the digitized safety of machine interaction, Josie seeks relief from the actuarial logic of her vocation and the calculative interpersonal engagements it entails. "Nobody talked to me, nobody asked me any questions, nobody wanted any bigger decision than if I wanted to keep the king or the ace. At the machines, I was safe and away."

Josie suggests here that the turn to asocial forms of gambling may have something to do with the growth of service sector labor. If, as sociologist Daniel Bell suggests, postindustrial society is an economy driven by exchanges between people rather than between people and machines, then perhaps it makes sense that people are dedicating increasing amounts of their time away from work to machines.<sup>24</sup> The machine is a respite. In Las Vegas, a city that sociologist Mike Davis has called the "Detroit of the postindustrial economy," the hypersociality of labor forms is accompanied by forms of escape that seem to reproduce asociality as a norm.<sup>25</sup>

In *The Managed Heart*, sociologist Arlie Hochschild argues that a shift from assembly-line factory work to service sector work has been accompanied by a shift from physical labor to what she calls "emotional labor," or labor in which "the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself."<sup>26</sup> Although physical labor requires detaching oneself from one's own body, emotional labor requires detaching oneself from one's own feelings; workers are prone to alienation or estrangement from their emotions, which wear thin as they are processed and managed in the marketplace.<sup>27</sup> Hochschild's analysis resonates in gamblers' narratives. "There are so many people dependent on me, I have no sense of self," says Lola, a buffet waitress and mother of four: "When I'm at the machines, all my obligations fall away and I can fade away."

### Money and Time

Patsy recalls her job as a welfare officer at the State of Nevada's food stamp office: "All day long I'd hear sad

stories of no food, unwanted pregnancy, violence. But it all slid right off me because I was so wrapped up in those machines. I was like a robot—*next, snap, what's your zip code, you don't belong here*—I wasn't human." "The machines were like heaven," she remembers, "because I didn't have to talk to them, just feed them money."

Money is a key resource of the actuarial self. Its value shifts through the digitized repeat wagering of machine play. Julie told me: "You put a twenty dollar bill in the machine and it's no longer a twenty dollar bill, it has no value in that sense. It's like a token, it excludes money value completely." Josie elaborates: "Money was almost like a God, I had to have it. But with the gambling, money had no value, no significance, it was just this thing—just get me in the zone, that's all . . . You lose value, until there's no value at all. Except the zone—the zone is your God."

In the economy of the zone, winning money is not the aim. "You're not playing for money," says Julie, "you're playing for credit—credit so you can sit there longer, which is the goal. It's not about winning; it's about continuing to play." Sharon would rather "spend two hours losing a jackpot" than cash it out, as this would mean exiting the zone to wait for the machine to drop her winnings, or, in the event that its hopper is low, for attendants to come pay her off. Winning—too much, too soon, or too often—interrupts the tempo of play, disturbing the harmonious regularity of the zone. Julie explains: "If it's a moderate day—*win, lose, win, lose*—you keep the same pace. But if you win big, it can prevent you from staying in the zone." Continuance of play depends on money's conversion from a means of acquisition to a means of suspension within a closed, autonomous circuit.

"Gambling changed my relationship to money" said Isabella. "Money became the means to gamble, that's all it was to me. I'd conserve gas so I'd have the

money to gamble, and instead of going to the grocery store regularly, I'd wait to go to Wal-Mart and do it all at one time—that way I wouldn't have to waste the gas to go more than once. I *economized*." Economizing—the responsible accounting behavior of the risk-managing self—is harnessed to radically different ends by compulsive gamblers.

In between play sessions, Patsy engaged in compulsive calculative rituals around money:

For me, getting the money together was part of the process. I'd go to the bank and get \$1,000, \$400, whatever amount. I had a weird thing where I could never just take out \$20, or just spend \$43—I had to spend in \$100s. And other weird things too. . . . Like if I won, I could spend back to \$500 but I would never keep \$600; it would be okay to put back \$800, but I had to keep another certain amount—there were lots of little rules.

After gambling, Patsy would sit and count her money, "over and over again, in my car, at stop lights in the dark, in my lap, hundreds of dollars—what was the use?" Her excessive attention to money, she suggests, was beyond utility—a "weird thing" that served no clear purpose. Money became fetish-like, unhinged from conventional exchange value. "I spent a lot of time thinking about money, touching money, calling the bank to keep track of my money, to know the time frame of when checks cleared, counting it and counting it . . . but in fact, I wasn't actually *counting* at all." The year after Patsy stopped gambling she did her taxes and found that over a six-month period of gambling, when she had not been able to "count" according to conventional value standards, her losses exceeded \$10,000.

"It stopped mattering how much I won, or lost," Sharon remembers of her ten years of gambling. "I couldn't set limits. The last time I gambled I was playing

with a hundred dollars and I lost it all. I parlayed it into \$200, then got down to one dollar, and with that I hit another hundred dollars. I didn't leave until I spent the whole hundred dollars again." Julie breathlessly describes the sequential refinancing of a typical play session:

I got four aces four times, that's \$200 a shot, 800 credits each time, that means I could have cashed out \$800 total. But each time I hit, I'd play it down to 200 credits from 800 credits and I'd say, Well, I'll just hit the aces again and then I'll leave. Then I'd get four of a kind and have like 437 credits and I'd say I'll just go to 400 and leave, and then at 400 I'd just push the button again and drop below 400, and I'd say, Well now I'm down past 400, I'll just get back up to 400 and then I'll cash out. And then I'd find myself closer to 300 and I'd say, Once I get down to 300 I'll go. And then when I go below that I'd say, Well, I might as well keep going, I've already blown what I was gonna blow—I might as well try to get the aces again, and it would continue.

Dizzying swings in fortune distort all sense of value, such that gains and losses are difficult to track and blur into each other.

In his book on gambling, Lears asks: "In a society such as ours, where responsibility and choice are exalted, where capital accumulation is a duty and cash a sacred cow, what could be more subversive than the readiness to reduce money to mere counters in a game?"<sup>28</sup> He suggests that gamblers pose a challenge to the idea of productive citizenship: "The idea that loss is not only inescapable but perhaps even liberating does not sit well with our success mythology, which assumes at least implicitly that 'winning is the only thing.'"<sup>29</sup>

Compulsive gamblers complicate Lears's analysis, suggesting that something more is afoot than a simple challenge, subversion, or liberating renunciation of money. In their own way, gamblers act within social values about money. Patsy, the welfare officer, told me: "I always had income coming in, every week it was something—a \$600 paycheck, \$500 child support, my husband's retirement checks. We always had like three credit cards so if I had a bad spell I'd just put it on the cards." The resources of a conventional calculative lifestyle supported Patsy's gambling, and vice versa: "One time I had maxed out the three cards, but then I hit a jackpot and paid them all off." Her compulsive gambling does not exactly oppose the logic of the risk-managing, maximizing self—if anything, it intensifies (or "maxes out") that logic. In this sense, Patsy's gambling could be said to convert the calculative ideals of free-market society into a mode of behavior that departs from dominant models of productive citizenship.

Time is another resource of calculative selfhood that gamblers manage to convert into a means of escape through their machine play. In the play zone, the measured pace of "clock time," as gamblers call it, "stops mattering," "sits still," is "gone" or "lost"; time seems to condense or expand according to the particular rhythm they establish. Compulsive gamblers, for whom play sessions of seventeen hours or whole weekends are not unusual, talk about time as they do about money: one can *salvage* from time, *extract* from it, *liquidate* it, *squander* it. Time becomes a kind of credit whose value is refinanced along the lines of play—a manipulable playing currency rather than a determinative order. Randall comments that machine play makes him feel he is "bending time" such that he goes "into a different time frame, like in slow motion. It's a whole other time zone."

Just as money value is converted into zone credit, clock time is converted into zone time. Julie describes this:

When the time comes to leave and the things I escaped from start crowding back into my brain, I find myself rationalizing, *Well, I don't really have to go today . . .* and I ask an attendant to hold my machine while I run to the payphone to buy myself more time—*Oh, I'm sick, or, I can't come today*—and then back to continue, and now there's three more hours. And when those three hours are up, I think, *I have to save money for the phone calls I'll have to make to cancel all the appointments I am going to miss. . . .* I'm thinking of how to arrange things so that I can stay there, how to economize.

The economizing of zone time, like that of zone credit, extends beyond the zone itself: "Time in general, not just while I was playing," says Sharon, "becomes very distorted. I feel like I can manipulate it very easily, salvage much more than I can from a small unit of it—go grocery shopping on the way to the casino, and while I'm there make a doctor's appointment on the cellular phone, and then on the way home. . . . Everything I do is relative to gambling time."

"I'd be later and later and later to work," Patsy recalls:

At break time I'd ask my supervisor, *Do you mind if I go to the bank?*—and I'd be out the door. I was just *wound*. My sense of time was totally out the door. I'd win a royal and I'd be ticked off because I'd have to wait for them to come pay me off. The other workers would look at the clock when I came back and I would think, *What are you looking at the clock for? Mind your own business.*

As Patsy describes it, her sense of time—and she herself—are "out the door." At every chance she attempts to escape clock time, such that she becomes her own

kind of time: she is "wound" like a clock; she is "ticked off" as time ticks by during her wait for a jackpot payoff; when she returns to work, resentful coworkers look pointedly at the clock.

### Machine Life

The mechanism to which the participants in a game of chance entrust themselves seizes them body and soul, so that even in their private sphere . . . they are capable only of a reflex action. . . . They live their lives as automatons . . . who have completely liquidated their memories.

—Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire"

I hear most people say that the definition of gambling is pure chance, where you don't know the outcome. But I do know: either I'm going to win, or I'm going to lose. The interaction with the machine is clean cut, the parameters are clearly defined—all I have to do is pick *yes* or *no*. I decide which cards to keep, which to discard, case closed. I don't care if it *takes* coins, or *pays out* coins: the contract is that when I put a new coin in, get five new cards, and press those buttons, I am allowed to *continue*.

So it isn't really a gamble at all—in fact, it's one of the few places I'm certain about anything. If I had ever believed that it was about chance, about variables that could make anything go in a given way at any time that I couldn't control, then I would've been scared to death to gamble. If you can't rely on the machine, you might as well be in the human world where you have no predictability either.

—Sharon

If all gambling entails the "certain rapid resolution of an uncertain outcome," as Erving Goffman phrased it,



then digital gambling further truncates the uncertainty, immediately resolving the event of the bet with the press of a button.<sup>30</sup> Sharon remarks: "I was addicted to making decisions in an unmessy way, to engaging in something where *I knew what the outcome would be.*" Unlike Geertz's cockfight, the gambling machine is not a conduit of chance that allows selfhood to emerge in a context of social and economic uncertainty, but rather, a dependable mechanism for securing a zone of certainty in an uncertain human world. While the human world is associated with dependence, temporality, unpredictability, mess, and dangerous remainders, the machine is linked to dissociation, atemporality, predictability, closure, and depletion—a deadly, circular sort of perfection.

"The video game holds out two promises," wrote Sherry Turkle in 1984; "the first is a touch of infinity—the promise of a game that never stops. . . . [The second] is the promise of perfection."<sup>31</sup> She suggested that the appeal of video games lay in their consistency of response and "either/or" structure. Machine life, as Patsy calls it, shrinks choice to a limited universe of rules. All you have to do is "pick yes or no," Sharon tells us. "Awake, my whole day was structured around getting out of the house to go gamble. At night, I would dream about the machine, I'd see it, the cards flipping, the whole screen. I'd be playing, making decisions about which cards to keep and which to throw away." The digital game interface orders gamblers' waking lives and dream lives with its unending flow of mini-decisions.

What relation does this flow of mini-decisions bear to the ever-proliferating choices that actuarial selves face in contemporary free-market society? Compulsive machine gamblers speak of choice in ambivalent terms: it is emancipatory and entrapping, annihilatory and capacitating, reassuring and demonic. Lola, the buffet waitress, talks of "resting in the machine," then later in her narrative describes video poker's relentless stream

of card-choosing as commanding—the activity does not only *hold*, but *hooks* and *captures* her attention. Julie identifies the compulsory nature of the choices she faces while gambling: "You *have no choice* but to concentrate on the screen; you simply cannot think about anything except which cards you are going to choose to keep and which you're going to choose to discard." Video poker compulsion unfolds in and through choice—precisely where a free-market logic posits the triumph of the actuarial self.

Randall tells me that he plays video poker because he wishes to be "in control"; moments later, without a sense of contradiction, he confides that he wishes he was "a robot," free of self-directive capacities. Video poker grants both of Randall's wishes. Although the game multiplies choices, they are reformatted as a self-dissolving flow of repetitive motion—so digitally intensified that one makes them without "choosing" as such.

In the zone of machine play that compulsive gamblers describe, the conventional means of self-enterprise—money, time, sociality, and bodily existence—are disengaged from the agenda of the maximizing self, and put in the service of self-liquidation. This self-liquidation participates in the logic of what Sigmund Freud called "repetition compulsion" or "death drive," by which he meant an organism's ongoing reflex to extinguish the perturbations, tensions and uncertainties of existence in order to return to a state of rest.<sup>32</sup> The detours or "circuitous paths" that each organism takes in moving toward this state of rest are what shape its life struggle, and in this sense, the death drive is vital. Compulsive gamblers embrace the gambling machine as a mechanism for short-circuiting life and its struggle.

Gambling machines, designed to accelerate "player extinction," distill the economy of the death drive such that it becomes an end in itself. Eventually, Sharon no longer even looks at the cards she has been dealt: "You

reach an extreme point where you don't even delude yourself that you're in control of anything but strapping yourself into a machine and staying there until you lose. All that stuff that may draw you in the beginning—the choice, the decisions, the skill—is stripped away, and you accept the certainty of chance: the proof is the zero at the end.”

Citing social phenomena as far-ranging as video games and religious fundamentalism, some contemporary psychoanalytic scholars suggest that the death drive has become a harbinger of an end to social ties. My aim here has not been to position compulsive gamblers as exemplars of a sweeping social diagnosis such as this, but rather, to examine the specifics of their experience for clues that might tell us more about the forms of self-loss that people seek today, and the forms of selfhood they seek to relieve.

#### Postscript

Until 2003, former “drug czar” William Bennett, Director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, was best known for his philosophy of personal accountability. He elaborated this philosophy in *The Book of Virtues*, including chapters on self-discipline and responsibility.<sup>33</sup> A widely publicized scandal in 2003 revealed his substantial gambling habit; video poker was his game of choice. “I’ve been a machine person,” he told reporters: “When I go to the tables, people talk—and they want to talk about politics. I don’t want that. I do this for three hours to relax.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, casino records show that Bennett often played for two or three days at a time, preferring the 500-a-pull slot areas in Atlantic City and Las Vegas casinos. Although he lost \$8 million over a decade of gambling, he claimed that his habit was not technically an addiction because “I don’t play the milk money.”

What public figure better captures the uneasy embrace of self-sovereignty by citizens of free market

society than Bennett—simultaneously a beacon of individual autonomy and of addiction?

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