

Machine Narratives

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What follows are excerpts from a set of narratives recorded over a number of years in Las Vegas, Nevada in the course of fieldwork for a doctoral dissertation in cultural anthropology. The narratives are those of women addicted to video poker, a game of chance that has been called "electronic morphine" and "the crack cocaine of gambling."

I frame my project as an exploration of what compulsive machine play can tell us about the constraints and possibilities for human life and subjectivity under increasingly technological conditions. Much contemporary cultural theory, following the publication of Donna Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" ten years ago, embraces machines as sites of emancipatory possibility and creative human embodiment. I maintain that an adequate exploration of technology and subjectivity in the contemporary world must remain mindful of the ways in which machines can inhibit creativity, forestall human potential, strangle speech, exhaust vitality, and deplete the person.

The loose constellation of perspectives I attempt to triangulate are: the diagnostic criteria and treatment practices of clinicians and researchers focusing on what they identify as "pathological gambling"; the quasi-behaviorist design principles of gaming industry technology engineers and the managerial strategies of casino executives; the narrative attempts of gamblers to convey the subjective, phenomenological aspects of their repetitive encounters with machines. My analysis—situated at the intersection of subjective experience and the discursive and material fields which constitute, enable, and limit such experience—charts the complex interaction of diagnostic and therapeutic apparatuses, corporate infrastructure, and techniques of the self.

The 80 narratives I recorded (most of them two hours in length) are characterized by a striking set of seeming paradoxes: Helpless control, the safety of risk, the certainty of chance, the fixity of speed, the automatism of autonomy, the possibilities and freedoms that emerge in the moment of loss or zeroing out, and being alive in the dead zone or in overdrive while in standstill. Speaking to me, and to my tape recorder, machine gamblers sought to communicate what it was like to be caught in the circuit of a game in which winning is beside the point, in which there is no final move, no possibility of resolution. This experience was conveyed a number of registers, one of which was the telling of life stories. These stories mapped an uncanny machinic destiny whereby loss was determined ahead of time, inherited, and in danger of being passed on.

My listening to the narratives was framed by an understanding that language, more than a representational capacity, is a medium, perhaps even a machine, in which one can both be caught and free oneself. The narratives, despite their inadequacy to fully disclose experience (and perhaps by virtue of this very failure), not only bear the traces of experience but in certain respects enact that experience. (To a large extent one loses a sense of this enactment in the textual rendering that follows, not only because I have cut out much of the repetition but because it is impossible to replicate the tone, speed and cadence of the voices.)

Along the lines of what Gilles Deleuze suggests in his *Essays Critical and Clinical*, perhaps repetition itself can lead to new articulations and openings out of experiential impasse. It seems to me that there are moments of creative, transformative, even therapeutic movement in the narratives, moments of possibility that we might consider a responsive working-through as opposed to an automatic acting-out. The narratives register a desire to tell, and stand as a certain kind of address. As I see it the vital question they pose is not how to get rid of the machine, but rather what to do with it, how to live with it.

I have chosen here to foreground the narratives themselves rather than to discuss them within a theoretical framework, although possibilities for psychoanalytic insight abound: the narratives address themes of repetition, mastery, desire, *jouissance*, and the death drive, to name a salient few. On its own the material is richly suggestive of interpretation, in a more evocative than analytic fashion.

In the following excerpts I use the pseudonyms that each woman chose for herself.

I. Janet

1995. I'm sitting in a booth at the back of a small windowless bar on the lower level of the Charleston Boulevard Strip Mall. The mall is a crumbling 1960's structure in North Las Vegas, an equally crumbling neighborhood off the seedy end of the famous Las Vegas Strip. I've just come out of a late evening Gamblers Anonymous meeting upstairs at the Unity Club, GA's unglamorous headquarters, inauspiciously located a few rooms down the hall from the Las Vegas Card Dealers' Institute. With me is Janet, a 28 year old psychology major at UNLV. The army is paying for her education. She has two children that live with her former husband, and one adopted son with her current husband. She works part time as a fundraiser for the National Missing Children Locate Center. I ask her why she plays video poker.

I've played table games but I never got addicted. You just sit there and wait for the card. It was too slow for me. I mean, it takes an hour to get down five hands, sitting at a table. I had to do it fast, quicker. If I was going to win, then the more times I did it the more I'd win, right? If I'm sitting at a video poker machine and I get a hundred chances, then the odds are higher. I gotta do it now, I gotta do it now, right now—I had no patience waiting. I didn't like the old slot machines either; there's no decisions to make. With them I'm not a part of the win, I'm just a part of the machine. With video poker, as you play, the machine becomes less and less important. The game, holding the cards: the cards are more important. It starts out the machine and then it's the cards. And then it's what's going to happen next.

When I was sitting there playing, it was the anticipation of the next five cards that were going to come up. You always think that the very next hand is going to be perfect. One day I won two Royal Flushes—that's two thousand dollars—and put in right back in. You have no concept of value anymore. If

it's a twenty dollar bill that you put in, it's no longer a twenty dollar bill, it has no value. It's like a token, it excludes money value completely. You're not playing for money, you're playing for credit. Credit so you can sit there longer, which is the goal. I think I wanna win, but more of it's the game. Money is ammunition to continue playing. The game is everything.

I only played at Texaco, the gas station. At first you have to pick a machine. You get nervous and you make a choice, you just randomly make a choice, and then once you're sitting there you say, "Well, if this one doesn't pay I'll move to that one." But it never happens. You always have that intention but you don't move. You put your first twenty in there and then you say "Well, one more twenty." Then, "We'll just try one more twenty." You can't leave the machine, you're attached.

You don't pay attention to what's going on around you. You are not there. You are with the machine and that's all you're with. Time is gone. It goes so fast—it's pathetic. It feels like you've just been there an hour or two and you've been there all day. You can't go to the bathroom, you don't eat, you've got people watching your machine while you go to the bank to get more money, you're paying people to do it. I would have to go pick up my son and I'd try to get him to go do things so I could have time to gamble. I'd be callin' down to Texaco askin' "Did anyone sit at my machine yet? Did anyone get my machine?"

But I found out it had nothing to do with which machine it was, it had to do with the second you hit the buttons. It had to do with timing. You want to be the one to get the timing right. You want to be the one to get the challenge, to get the timing. You've got to hurry. I could play a machine so fast you couldn't even keep up with me. You feel out of control... I think the only thing you can control is the speed. You know what's going to happen [her voice becomes slow and almost a whisper], you just don't know when, but you can control how soon it happens. The rest is all chance, and speed is the only way to control the chance. You want to be the lucky one, and it has happened to me before. [voice stronger now] Watching me, I could play it so fast—it was like a typewriter, I've got every button memorized. I go faster and faster and faster. And when time becomes an issue, I play even faster. When the time comes to leave I start rationalizing: "Well, I don't have to really go today," or I'd just ask somebody to hold my machine while I ran to the payphone, "Oh, I'm sick," and then go back in there and continue. I've made up that my brother died to keep gambling. That's bad. That's insane.

When you're gambling you don't go, "Oh, I'm out of money." It don't happen like that. It's almost like there are two sides to your subconscious. One side knows that you're almost out of money and the other side doesn't have a clue. And when you get to that point where you start getting low, you start getting more desperate, and the more faster you blood pumps, the more faster you gamble too, the more urgency comes to it, the lower money you get. When the credit gets lower and lower, you get faster and faster. If it's a moderate day—win, lose, win, lose—you keep the same pace. But if you win big and put it all back in, your fingers move so fast. When you first get there and sit down, you're not playing so fast. But when you start losing, the pace picks up. [she mimics this pace in her speech] You're runnin' out of money, you're running out of player credit, your brain is racing. Wondering where you're supposed to be, what you can do to get out of where you're supposed to be, whatever, you're in overdrive. The longer you stay, the more things there are... and then it's about the chase: I've gotta undo it. It's like a bullet and you want it to stop, you want to pull that bullet back. After you shoot the gun, you want to push the rewind button and go back to where you started, but you can't. That's what the race about—it's all about trying to undo it. It's not about trying to fix it, you want to undo it. You want to go back to where it didn't even happen, to where you could walk out of there as if you'd never gone in.

When I gambled I felt so tired, like I need to go to sleep but I couldn't. I didn't care about eating—I

lost so much weight. My pants were hanging on me and my face broke out in zits. Blemishes everywhere. My nails all broke, I chewed 'em all off. My school was neglected, my son I was yellin' at him, my house was a mess, everything went to shit. I have legal problems. I'm going to get divorced. I produced all of these problems just by sitting there, playing.

I grew up my whole entire life defeating the label that I was born with. My mother is a total liar, pathological, everything. She's mentally ill, very sick. She had the worst name in town. They had a sign in the gas station, big, that said DO NOT ACCEPT CHECKS from my mother. I told myself I wouldn't be like her, I wouldn't lie, cheat, steal, hurt anybody deliberately for personal gain, and I didn't do that, until this gambling.

It was an awful way to live. But I always put a face on—nobody knew I'd be spending two thousand dollars in one day. I wanted to stop so bad, I told myself, I'll just fix my mess and then I'll stop. After I win it back. I started looking around at people to see if they had money because I was going to use them, I was even thinking about sleeping with them, I mean anything, I was so desperate. It's like you get a tolerance for your rock bottom. You think you've hit it and then it becomes normal. You cope with it, you get complacent, you see it isn't so bad, and then it's scary because you see there's something even lower.

I had a horrible childhood. I had no biological parents, and I have the pain to fill of always not feeling good enough and needing people to love me. I set myself up to fail and when I do it's devastating. Gambling covers up feelings of pain, it's exhilarating, it's the only way I can forget. Once I'm playing nothing else enters my mind, I don't think about nothing. On the machine nobody's holding me back. I can just have my free reign. I feel independent. I could control the machine, I thought. You're the one pushing the buttons. It's a total sense of control. That's why I don't ever leave.

I relate and I talk through a language that I can understand, which is the machine and I understand the machine. If I talk in the machine's language, I find myself really being able to relate to my problems. Like for example, if you're sitting there and you get a 4 of the royal and the 2 of diamonds, then you're not gonna throw away the ace or the king, you're going to throw away the 2 of diamonds. So in terms of that I'll kinda evaluate my life. My husband told me too "you're like my four aces," you know. It's things like that I can relate to. If I compare life to a machine, somehow I can understand it better. The game became a language I could live through. Like in life, you're not ever gonna hit the big jackpot unless you put all the whole total bets in, right? You've gotta go for it all, you can't do it halfway, you can't do it just a little bit. So when I go in to gamble I'm not gonna do it just a little bit, I'm gonna do it good. I'm already here, I'm gonna bet as much as I can. What's the sense of betting if you don't?

II. Sharon

1998. I meet Sharon at a Gamblers Anonymous meeting for women. She seems distrustful but invites me to her home for an interview. We talk for three hours, first in the kitchen and then in her bedroom. She starts by recounting the story of returning to Las Vegas after completing a medical degree.

When I left I used my last 800 dollars to rent a U-Haul truck, loaded everything up, didn't bother to shower or change clothes—I still had scrubs on from a 16 hour shift that had urine and blood and everything from the critical care ward. I drove home with no sleep. When I pulled up in front of this house I read the contract on the U-haul rental and it said that if I had the truck back by a certain hour I got a 59 dollar refund, and so I threw open the garage door and threw open the back of

the haul truck and proceeded to bring all my boxes into my bedroom, where I piled them all up in a double row and threw a sheet on them, and a pillow on top of the sheet. I grabbed a sweater and went out in the same clothes, and I returned the truck and I was gone—I can't remember if it was 4 or 5 days—I was gone a really really long time, and I spent everything that I had saved and that was waiting for me when I got home.

That last year in school I knew I was about to crash psychologically and professionally, but I made my finest effort because I knew that at the end of that effort, whatever I had achieved or hyper-achieved was going to have to be remembered for a long time, because I was going on the mother of all gambling binges. I knew that this was going to be the definitive self-destructive trip, and that's what motivated me to do so well my last year up there. When the clock struck the exact hour of midnight when my obligations and my responsibilities were through, then all bets were off—I didn't show-er, I didn't change, I didn't care, because now it was part B of my agenda.

The night I got in there was a big medical conference at the Hilton, which every one of my colleagues or mentors was going to be at, and I thought somehow somehow I could play a little and then run over there, you know, still in the same clothes I had left these people in three states away, but I wasn't thinking clearly. I was playing nickel video poker machines, because I was going to start very slow. When the lectures were over I'd go gamble all night. Every morning I'd go to the conference brunches at the Hilton, they'd give me these bags of things like T-shirts and cups, promo stuff, and I'd sit in a couple of presentations, they'd dim the lights, I'd snooze, then get up, go out and get a complimentary orange juice or whatever that they had for us and then go right back to the machines.

I was so out of control, when I think back to those few days. I didn't really sleep or eat at all. The conference ended, everyone was leaving, I was totally devastated emotionally, physically, financially, psychologically, I couldn't even make any decisions, everything was surreal, even driving was a challenge because I hadn't slept or eaten properly, I had all this caffeine in me, and I could see, like a domino effect, that I was blowing my career. I knew that I had crossed the line and I could see the dominoes falling. I knew I was throwing away 10 years of full time education.

When I finally came home I felt dead and empty and uncomfortable and crusty in every possible way you would imagine, I had been menstruating the whole time. I had the boxes right here where my bed was and I lay on this pillow and turned my head like this, and right there in the reflection of that mirror in between the boxes, I see three nickels and I get this incredible adrenaline rush, like ALL IS NOT LOST—this is fifteen cents I'm looking at, and this is after I've spent a quarter of a million dollars for my education and still owed on loans, and all that dissolved when I saw those three little nickels in the reflection in the mirror. I kind of have the money thing back in perspective now and wouldn't get that excited if I saw three hundred dollar bills, and I wouldn't get up out of bed at a reasonable hour and drive a car with a tank full of gas to the corner to spend three dollars, let alone getting up after that kind of bender at three o'clock in the morning on a tank that read empty and drive to the closest casino for 15 cents. I picked up those three nickels and went outta here with a spring in my step, opened the garage door and got in my car and drove to the casino: "Oh yea everything's gonna be good now." And I lost those three nickels.

Once, after a year's abstinence, I dreamed that I had played and I woke up sweating. I threw on the light and looked around for coins and matchbooks, because it was so real I actually felt like I'd been at a casino. The only thing that made me realize I wasn't was that whenever I come in for the night to start the next day I press the odometer to zero it out, I always do that as my last thing, so I'm perfect—zeroed out, starting a new day of miles. I went out to my car in the middle of the night and looked at the odometer, and it was 000, the total mileage hadn't changed.

I didn't care if it took coins or paid out coins, to me the gambling was very clean cut, the parameters were clearly defined. The machine got my coins, and in return I got isolation, I got to play out a hand for chance. It was very clean. I could have total order and mastery there. I may win, I may lose, if I lose, that's the end of the relationship. It was understood, part of the arrangement. Then it starts again. It was like a series of 12, 15 second relationships. I can do that. What can I screw up in 12–15 seconds till the next five cards come on the machine? Not much!

I'd gravitate toward the corners, where no one would bother me. I'd get all my change at once because I didn't want a change girl coming up to me, and in the end I'd bring a liter of diet coke because I didn't want no cocktail waitresses bugging me. I'd sometimes put my foot up on one side and that was the final barrier: LEAVE ME ALONE. I felt safe there, unlike being with a person. It was like, "God, just tell me what you want from me, if I can deliver it I'll let you know, if I can't I'll be gone. Which one is the right one? Just gimme a little hint, and I'll pick it and go."

I was addicted to making decisions in an un-messy way, to engaging in something where I knew what the outcome would be. I hear most people say that the pure definition of gambling is pure chance, where you don't know the outcome. But for me, I do know: I'm either gonna win or gonna lose. That's easy for me—there's no grey matter. None of that messy in-between stuff. It wasn't really a gamble at all, it was one of the few places I was certain about anything. No uncertainty at all. I got to the point where I didn't even expect to win! I knew I was going to lose, and that made it even safer. I almost controlled that fact. If I had the amount of money to continue to practice that control, I'd probably still be playing. It's just that I ran out of money to lose.

It amazes me when I hear people say, "I thought I'd win." I never believed that! If I had believed that there was uncertainty, or variables that could make anything go in a given way at any time, I would've been scared to death to be in there. I went in knowing for certain that I would be able to kill the uncertainty.

In the end, I wouldn't even look at the cards, I'd just press the "deal" and the "play" button in rapid succession, I'd just watch the coin meter go up and down, and if I were dealt a winner and it would go up, I'd think, "how many times can I press this before all my money gets consumed?" Absolutely no skill, no decision making, and I've seen other addicts do that. It was like destroying yourself, blowing your brains out! In the end, there really is no risk: you know you're gonna lose. I knew, when I pressed those buttons, that I would get the desired response I needed to stay in my hiding or retain control over my thought. The contract, the relationship was that when I put the new coin in, and got five new cards and pressed those buttons, I was allowed to continue, to stay there.

That's why when a coin jams, or when the hopper empties, I really feel that my life is being threatened at those moments. I mean, oh my God—it's not a question of moving to the next machine, it's not a question of waiting for a mechanic, it's a question of WHY-ISN'T-THIS-MACHINE-WORKING!?!? It was worse than a dysfunctional washer or car; the video poker machine I could not tolerate any malfunctions in, because it was the one thing I could rely on. I would not be comfortable to trust that machine, to feel safe, and I'd have to leave to another machine or another casino, because that basic contract had been betrayed. It was serious—anyone touching my machine or the machine having to be opened—it was paralyzing. I would feel like I had been duped, betrayed, like being cheated on by a lover. What did the man with the keys do inside there? What did he change or reset in there? He touched my coins in that bucket, and I would feel violated. It was right in my face: YOU ARE NOT IN CONTROL. I was confronted with the danger that I would not get the behavior response every time. And then what're you gonna do? If it's not gonna happen in here then you might as well be in the real world where you have no predictability either.

Time in general, not just while I was playing, became very distorted. I felt like I could manipulate it very easily. I squandered a lot of it, it went by a lot faster, I thought I could salvage much more than I could from a small amount of time. When I was actually playing, I felt like it disappeared. I wanted it to go very slowly. No matter how bad I felt, no matter how much I lost, it was always too soon for me to be done. Because I always knew at that minute the transition would come, no longer the world according to Sharon but the real world, and I was very scared of that. Talk about time going by, I can't believe I squandered ten years going from gamble to gamble, minute to minute.

As long as I can remember I've felt a need to cut off activity at the pass—the doors, the windows, my head, you know, just lower the noise volume. Another thing I've done since I was a kid is unplug phones. Everything gets unplugged. This one here, the family line, all the phones. Total disconnection. Being this way can be very lonely. Kids—I made sure I never had them. Too messy. Sometimes I think the summation of my entire existence, my claim to fame, will be that when I die, it'll be really easy for people to go through my worldly possessions, because they'll be organized and categorized and neat and cleaned, that's all I'll have accomplished, because my primary focus was to avoid pain and avoid messes. You know how when some people die their affairs are an incredible mess to get in order? Well, to me that's kind of a commentary on the degree to which they lived. When I died—when I die, whatever I've done, it's gone, it's gonna be already archived, sorted out, I even have contact numbers for my life insurance policy, my burial plan, I think really it'll take somebody like two hours to settle all my affairs and erase the whole existence of Sharon. "She was neat." End of story. I wish my legacy would be more than that. Did I miss a big part of the puzzle in between there? Is the idea of living to do so in the most orderly, efficient and productive fashion? I try to see the logic and the payoff and the security in living another way, but I don't.

III. Isabella

1999. I meet Isabella during a group therapy session at a local clinic for problem gambling. We arrange an interview at her home. She's 38, attractive, a single mother to a 9 month year old baby boy. She worked her way through college after what she describes as a dirt-poor upbringing and started her own insurance company, then lost the money to gambling. She's now on welfare and takes care of her son, her 12 year old adopted stepdaughter, her mentally retarded younger sister, and her sister's small son. When I ask her to tell me about herself, Isabella gives me a short "autobiography" she had handwritten for the group therapy.

[from autobiography]

My mother married young and was under the control of my father. He was a travelling insulator he carried asbestos on his clothes and body. Each of the four kids was born in a separate state. He was an alcoholic and stayed away from home as much as possible. My mother once commented that he had wanted to move to Las Vegas, but if we had moved here we'd have always been in debt. My father was abusive, beatings were normal. As we got older it became surface-sexual—for example sitting on his lap at 16 and my dad trying to French kiss me. I said no, he threw me on the floor and said "tight as a virgin." He liked weak people, and he liked making strong people weak. I am very much like him. It's easy for me to be abusive. I am scared of becoming abusive to my son. He is so precious to me, but then my father used to say those things about us. The meanness sometimes sneaks up on me and I am brutal to someone. I am always fearful of that becoming uncontrollable. I fight that with logic and empathy.

My grandmother was my only protector, she just let me be a kid and kept everyone away. When she died in 1993 I lost a very important safety person. A month after that my dad learned he had terminal lung cancer caused by asbestos. He moved into a travel trailer and took visitors as he saw fit. He truly used me, and I him, for the anger release. He died 3 years ago.

My sister Diana died 3 months ago. She was having trouble breathing and on asthma and heart medication. She went in for a biopsy, found out she had terminal lung cancer. She was so sick for so long, it was a horrible thing. Asbestosis, from my father's work as an insulator. He bought it home on his clothes. It's in all of our lungs, the whole family. What she has, I could get it at any time, it could flare up and in a few months I could be dead, at any moment.

I met my husband at an insurance company where I worked. He was the only man who beat me in a contest, so I decided to marry him. It took two years to convince him. In reality we didn't love each other. He divorced me with as little emotion as I felt. It was a pitiful waste of 6 years for us both. I then decided to get even. I slept with all the men I met that I perceived as abusive or as hurting a person in their past. I did not get emotionally involved. I was self-sufficient, angry and smart. I manipulated my relationships until I had that man crying. I loved it, it was power. It also depleted all my kindness and empathy and I was mean, ugly, hard, violent, lying... I was a pitiful creature. I don't even remember their names. They did drugs, drank, hit women, abused themselves and all the people they touched. They deserved to get a taste back, and I gave it to them, in spades. And during this time, even with everyone around, I was alone. Sex turned into something I did quickly, to get it out of the way. I could use sex to have some control. I met Bill at a car wash. He saw me and liked the way I walked. I liked his walk too, long legs, nice ass, great car. I called him, we dated and all these lies came back on me. I feel now maybe it was time for me to get it back. Who knows. He slept with every woman he could find. He told me all the things I wanted to hear. He was smarter, more worldly, I wanted him. I never loved him, I obsessed about him. I couldn't tame that mean spirit and I could never find a control button. Three years we went on: Abuse and comfort and abuse and comfort. Finally I had a breakdown. Two days I blanked out, and when I came back I was dead: no emotion, no heart and no brain. Once again I had some man using me and I was just depleted. That's when I packed a gym bag and walked to Grandma's.

[from taped interview]

When I walked to California I had blisters so bad on my feet. It took me 3 days of walking. I was so distraught, I had nothing left inside of me, he had taken—I had allowed him to take—every single iota of anything that belonged to me—out of my body. He had everything, he had me totally. He kicked me out and I had nowhere to go, so I walked from Vegas to California, 93 and 95 all the way up to Redding. It was a crazy, dangerous thing to do but at that point I was totally out of it.

Last August I found out I was pregnant. I wasn't working, I wasn't good for much of anything. I was sick, heavy, and exhausted, I had no desire to put up with anyone else. I was selling insurance and I couldn't deal with the people. Instead of working I'd go to the casinos. I gambled all through my pregnancy, even when I was 9 months pregnant. I expected to go into labor at the machines. My son would move around, my legs would go numb. Up until days before he was born I was in—I mean at the machine, 12, 14 hours a day. Even right after I couldn't stop, I'd leave him at home with my sister for hours and hours. I was nursing, and one day I went to work but I went into the casinos instead, and I had a beige jacket, and there were stains all the way down to my hips from the leaking of my breasts, that didn't even stop me, I didn't know it was happening.

Jesse crying and wanting to nurse all the time... although it's a wonderful feeling, it takes a month or a month and a half or two months to get used to it--it's not my body anymore, it belongs to him. It's never not been my body, I mean there's been times in my life where it wasn't--my whole life I've had to deal with people who felt they had a right to my body, my thought process, my life, my every-thing, it was like they didn't understand that it was mine--but I fought hard to get it back: "No, this is my space, you can't come here, if I say no I mean no," and then he comes in here and all of a sudden it's not my body anymore, he's hungry, he wants to nurse and that's it, my body's saying, "bye, see ya" because it's all coming out, I mean even if I said I'm not doing it anymore my breasts are saying "yes you are." I didn't have any space, I didn't have any privacy, nothing was mine any more. Now I'm trying to stop gambling but I get so bothered by the machines when I go to get formula and milk at the store.

I would play really fast. I was a speed player. My fingers are pretty nimble, my fingers and my eyes are coordinated quite nicely because of all the time I spent playing, in fact if anyone wants to become a typist I recommend gambling as an exercise. The longest I spent at a machine was 23 - 24 hours, at the same machine, over and over. Forever. You've got no sense of time, none at all. Totally out of time.

For the time that I was actually doing the gambling I was pretty safe and away, 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. My mind was totally zoned on that, I was almost hypnotized into being that machine, I became part of it sort of... it was very hypnotic. I wasn't totally present, I was gone. My body was there, but my soul and my mind where actually inside the game, inside the machine, in that king and queen turning over, and wanting the machine to do what I wanted it to do. When it would pay me off I'd think that I had known. I was talking to the damn machine, making deals, saying I'd cash out if I hit, which I never did.

Towards the end when all I did was gamble, I would be driving and there would be ... gaps. It would happen in the middle of the day on my way to gambling. I would lose the time. On the Interstate I would be all the way to the Exit ramp before I realized that I had actually just done an big circle turn and... I'd wake up and I'd go "what the hell what did I just do?"

I broke down crying toward the end there, right at the machine. I was praying to God, and then it just ate it up, and I just broke down crying right there at the machine, tears just coming down my face, and I'm sitting there thinking, "how stupid this is, to be sitting in front of a machine crying, like the machine really cares, and I know they've got video cameras all around me and I know they're laughing at me," and I'm crying more and more, broke down sobbing, and after that I only gambled another two weeks. I lost everything on purpose so then I could start clean.