

Beware: 'Machine Zone' Ahead

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All forms of gambling are not created equal. Marylanders should take this into account when deciding how to vote in November's referendum on slots.

My research as a social anthropologist has been focused on a dramatic turn that has taken place in recent decades from social forms of gambling played at tables to asocial forms played alone at video terminals. If voters endorse the proposal to alter Maryland's constitution to allow slot machines at racetracks, residents will be exposed to devices that have been carefully designed to make them lose as much as possible.

It's important for voters to understand how these machines work. Every feature of a slot machine -- its mathematical structure, visual graphics, sound dynamics, seating and screen ergonomics -- is calibrated to increase a gambler's "time on device" and to encourage "play to extinction," which is industry jargon for playing until all your money is gone. The machines have evolved from handles and reels to buttons and screens, from coins to credit cards, from a few games a minute to hundreds. Inside, complicated algorithms perform a high-tech version of "loading the dice" -- deceptions no self-respecting casino would ever allow in table gambling. The machines are designed to exploit aspects of human psychology, and they do it well. In the eyes of the gaming industry, this may look like success, but it comes at great expense for gamblers.

The rise in slots gambling, fueled in large part by these technological developments, has led to much higher rates of gambling addiction. This is evident at Gamblers Anonymous meetings in Las Vegas, where the vast majority of participants are machine gamblers. These gamblers are motivated more by a need to escape reality than any desire for entertainment and excitement. Without the presence of social elements such as other players or a live dealer, they are able to exit the world and enter a state where everything fades away. Slot machines so completely concentrate players' attention on a series of game events that anything troubling about their life situations -- physically, emotionally or socially -- gets blotted out. Players enter what's known as the "machine zone," where even winning stops mattering; in fact, it can be unwelcome because it interrupts the flow of play. Such players only stop when their credits are consumed.

Discussion of problem gambling typically focuses on individual gamblers and their "predisposition" to addiction. This focus elides the fact that some activities are more addictive than others. The aim of the gambling industry is to increase its bottom line, not to create addicts. But in effect, its efforts to make slot machines so effective at extracting money from people yields a product that, for all intents and purposes, approaches every player as a potential addict -- in other words, someone who won't stop playing until his or her means are depleted.

The pro-slots contingent promises increased money for the state, but that money can't be guaranteed. It is unclear how much people will spend on gambling, especially with the weakening economy. What revenue slot machines do generate comes not from entertaining but exploiting people. Should the government, whose role is to protect its citizens, become a partner in this ethically dubious enterprise? Marylanders should think



Playing the machines at Charles Town Races and Slots in West Virginia. (2007 Photo By Ricky Carioti -- The Washington Post)

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twice before allowing slots in their state.

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