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ROOM *for* DEBATE

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## Slot Machines Are Designed to Addict

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Modern slot machines – which typically feature video screens instead of mechanical reels, buttons instead of handles, and accept player loyalty cards instead of coins – are the driving force behind campaigns to expand legalized gambling in the United States. The devices generate upwards of three-quarters of gambling revenue. Even in so-called destination-resort casinos, they bring in twice as much as all other games put together.

But slots are noteworthy for more than their extraordinary revenue performance.

[Studies](#) by a Brown University psychiatrist, Robert Breen, have found that individuals who regularly play slots become addicted three to four times faster (in one year, versus three and a half years) than those who play cards or bet on sports.

The particular addictiveness of modern slots has to do with the solitary, continuous, rapid wagering they enable. It is possible to complete a game every three to four seconds, with no delay between one game and the next. Some machine gamblers become so caught up in the rhythm of play that it dampens their awareness of space, time and monetary value.

*Research has found that these devices, which create three-fourths of casino revenue, addict people more quickly than other types of gambling.*

“They don’t talk about competition or excitement,” says Robert Hunter, the clinical director of the Problem Gambling Center in Las Vegas. “They talk about

climbing into the screen and getting lost.”

They are after “time on device,” to use the gambling industry’s term for a mode of machine gambling that is less about risk and excitement than about maintaining a hypnotic flow of action – a mode that is especially profitable for casinos.

So-called problem gamblers are known to contribute a grossly disproportionate percentage of slot machine revenues – 30 to 60 percent, according to a number of government-commissioned studies in the [United States](#), [Canada](#), and [Australia](#). But they aren’t the only ones whose finances and well being are at stake in expansion of machine gambling. “Over-spending and/or losing track of time or money occurs for the majority of regular players,” a 2011 Canadian [report](#) found. As the psychologist Mark Dickerson [explains](#), the modern slot machine “erodes the player’s ability to maintain a sequence of informed and rational choices about purchasing the next game offered.”

Gambling industry leaders insist that addiction resides in people, not inanimate machines. Yet they invest a great deal of money and energy in the effort to influence consumers’ behavior through technology design. To take the title of one panel at an industry trade show, their aim is to “Build a Better Mousetrap.”

Surely, civic leaders looking to close budget gaps can find more ethical alternatives than capitalizing on such traps.