

Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas

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Human Capital Blog: In your book, you describe how electronic gambling machines—the modern equivalent of slot machines—are designed in such a way that they encourage addiction. Tell us about that, please.

Natasha Dow Schüll: If you have never actually been in a Las Vegas casino and your idea of it comes from a James Bond movie, you'd be surprised by what you'd find. Of course they still have card games and roulette wheels, but most of the money casinos make is from electronic gambling machines, which are amazingly sophisticated versions of the classic three-reel slot machine. Every aspect of their design—the hardware, the software, the math, even the seating components—is carefully designed to keep players at the machine, playing game after game. Play is simple and amazingly fast—it takes only three to four seconds per spin. The machines are programmed so gamblers win every now and then, and they give audiovisual feedback to encourage them to continue. They induce players to gamble quickly and repeatedly, developing a sort of rhythmic flow that can sweep them away. Gamblers talk about getting into a "zone" where everything but the game just drops out of their awareness. After a while, they crave the zone itself, so it stops being about beating the machine and becomes instead about staying on the machine for as long as they can so they can be in that zone. They're addicted, and they develop all the behaviors of an addict as a result.

My point is that it's no accident; the machines are designed to drive the kinds of behavior—playing faster, longer, and more intensively—that turns gamblers into addicts.

HCB: In your descriptions of the electronic gambling machines' place in the Las Vegas business model, you talk about the "Costco model of gambling." What do you mean by that?

Schüll: It's actually not my term; I've heard people in the gambling industry use it, and what they mean is that profits derive from the volume of play, not the price of play. These days the industry's most profitable "product" is the penny slot machine, not the high-stakes poker table, and not Bette Midler or Cirque de Soleil. Machine designers talk about increasing gamblers' "time on device," because the longer they can keep you playing, the more you'll spend and the more they make. You'll win some along the way, but if you stay on the machine, you'll lose it back and more.

HCB: This is your second close look at Las Vegas. The first was a documentary film on the city's all-you-can-eat buffets, and this time, you've written a book on the ways the machines are designed. What connects the two cases for you?

Schüll: Yes, I did the film during my time as a RWJF Health & Society Scholar. What links it with the gambling work I've done is that it also focuses on the kind of excessive consumption that Las Vegas is known for, and how it's encouraged by the material environment. As American consumers, we've all known the pleasures and shames of the buffet, so to speak—we've all faced that moment where you have a plate piled high with food you've chosen, but you decide you'd rather leave the salad on the plate and go get a second piece of cheesecake instead, even though you're not really hungry. One of the buffet customers in the movie talked about the phenomenon of being "full but not satisfied." That's what characterizes the gambling experience, too. Gamblers can stay on the machines for hours, avoiding trips to the bathroom, losing track of whether it's day or night—full but not satisfied.

HCB: Once the gambler is on the machine, it seems to cast its spell on them. But how do casinos get people to play slot machines in the first place?

Schüll: The gambling industry has a very strong marketing arm and they're always looking for new ways to get people in the door and sitting at their machines—which are more profitable than other games on the floor. It's been a problem in places like Macau, where the local market isn't so interested in machine gambling. One thing that's helped them move players off table games to machines are "electronic table games," which are basically large round tables with lots of individual screens, and a big screen in the middle with a virtual dealer. So you're playing against other people, but you're not looking at each other, not interacting with each other—it gets people used to the machine interface and the hope is that players will try out the slot machines a few yards away.

They're also very interested in getting younger people to play, and one way they're going after them is by designing machines that resemble popular online video games where you can progressively move up in rank. Some of them even incorporate bonus skill-features.

HCB: You were interviewed for "60 Minutes" for a program that first aired last year. What was that like?

Schüll: It was really interesting to watch the producers struggle to fit all the different pieces of the story into a relatively short television segment—the technology design, the

experience of gambling addiction, the debate over whether the addiction comes from the players or from the machines, the implications of legalizing machines as a way to raise revenue without raising taxes, and so on. It's such a rich issue and I thought they did a great job tying it all together! Afterwards, it was so gratifying to get so many emails from people around the country—not just gambling addicts but addiction treatment providers, concerned citizens, and even technology designers. Whenever I'm asked to contribute to legislative hearings on the expansion of machine gambling, I'm always surprised—and disturbed—at how little policy-makers and the public understand about how these machines are designed and what their effects are on people. I think the conversation about the expansion of machine gambling should be a conversation about consumer protection, and I see the “60 Minutes” piece as an important step in that direction

Read more about Schüll's work on machine gambling.