Rise of the Machines

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Natasha Dow Schüll. 2012. *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Natasha Dow Schüll's ethnography of slot machines in Las Vegas is a powerful ethnographic exposé on the limits of capitalist imagination. Lay and academic accounts of Las Vegas often trumpet a fantastic excess of self-maximizing possibility that people imagine is at the heart of this ludo-capitalist hub. *Addiction by Design* offers a beautifully nuanced depiction of gambling machines (e.g., video poker, multi-line slot machines, and their variants) that explodes often-romanticized writing by looking closely at actual gameplay in this epicenter of post-industrial capitalism.

Before exploring the book's material, I must pay homage to Schüll's scholarship. *Addiction by Design* employs an innovative mixture of methods, utilizing both academic papers and industry statements; engaging with theories and schematics of machines, odds, mathematics, and law; as well as building on ethnographic data from casino floors to industry conventions to therapeutic sessions. Schüll gained access to (understandably secretive) elite machine designers, manufacturers, and casino gurus, and she also elicited heartfelt soul-searches from addicts and mathematicians alike, and

the outcome is an outstanding work. More impressive still is the balance struck between all these rich sources so as to convey the technological collusion that Schüll sees as the overarching point of the text.

Let me be clear, this is not an ethnography of the 40 million annual visitors to Las Vegas who fly in for a piece of the accelerated American dream, nor the romanticized high-roller poker tables. There is little of the halo of light that assails pilgrims who have driven through the desert from Los Angeles. Neither does it moralize unnecessarily, nor divide players into chumps and savvy consumers; it gives little shrift to stereotypes of action-seeking machismos that come through some previous accounts. Schüll quickly, and rightly, dismisses assertions by heavyweights of the social science of gambling (Caillois, Goffman, and Geertz) that machine gambling is asocial and more or less absurd because its inbuilt edge makes loss inevitable and play as pointless as deposits in an unbreakable piggy bank.

To Schüll's infinite credit, the book dwells with the waitresses and retired nuclear geologists who play and stay and on the off-strip casinos that cater to the regulars who are the new heavyweights of revenue generation and who make up a full two-thirds of the local population (p. 8). At first it seemed to be all about these players, but a concern with design and industry soon takes hold, and even when the focus returns to players, they become an analogue to the machines that is based upon the framework established by the book's treatment and understanding of machines. *Addiction by Design*'s great strength is its ethnographic location at the margins of machine and person,

an interstitial space that makes them models of each other.

Above anything else, this is a very fine ethnography of a phenomenon, a machine-formatted headspace that is known as "the zone." Schüll is concerned with adding depth to accounts of gambling by following the affective link from players to machines and through to the architects of escape—those who make the machines, process the data, and engineer the casino floors. And it is escape that is offered; not something for nothing, but nothing as something. Schüll's informant-players are beyond the desire for a win; they wish to kindle a space where "you're with the machine and that's all you're with" (p. 2). This is the "zone," and Schüll is intent on exploring its architecture.

To that end, *Addiction by Design* is split into four parts, a division that is based upon the conceit that this arrangement bears a likeness to a map drawn by an informant who was explaining how she felt trapped by the machines. Each part supposedly represents a different point on the inescapable circuit of machine gambling. The conceit is wan, for really the book consists of two parts that are subdivided into two: 1.1) Where gambling machines and environments are engineered in the pursuit of profit through trapping customers with the "crack-cocaine of gambling devices" and 1.2) Where these machines interact with people over time so that players feel they choose to be trapped. Part 2.1 discusses the form that addiction takes and how this models social relations beyond the games, while 2.2 describes how the remedies offered for gambling addiction take the same form and style that the self-governing gambling machines

generate. These do not really represent points on a circuit, but rather progressively human-centric descriptions of what Schüll calls "machine-life." In reality, therefore, the form of the book matches its subject as it charts the acceleration of human-machine interaction into a self-effacing vortex. This is all nit-picking, because in large part the object of the book is achieved magnificently through ethnographic particulars.

Chapter One marks the beginning of a series of chapters which lays bare the technological trappings of "machine life." Taking the reader into the bowels of casinos, Schüll describes the history of casino design, which, she argues, has created a "structured chaos" (p. 44) of curved passageways, background music, and pleasing odors. These innovations deliberately foster confusion in patrons, putting them in a "permeable state" (p. 46), coaxing them toward cozy, private spaces where players are absorbed into their zone. While the information is incredibly interesting, it turns out in succeeding chapters that Schüll's primary gambling subjects were the off-strip locals who had no time for such trickery, and whose own casino settings were far less labyrinthine.

The warped time-management techniques used by casinos are the focus of Chapter Two. In a place where productivity is a result of increased leisure time, casino managers attempt to prolong play with er-

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gonomic consoles, bill acceptors, and a se-
ries of audacious and barely legal ways to
access players' money reserves (including
cash machines that advance you your with-
drawal limit for the next few days). Cash
value is converted into credits that disguise
the rate of loss, while the time between de-
cisions is filled with creative gimmicks to
prevent players from reflection. Both cus-
tomers and casino managers recognize that
it is the speed of play, and the consistency of
that speed, that relaxes players and gets
them into "the zone." This leads to some
startling figures. For instance, a skilled video
poker player can manage up to 1,200 hands
an hour; some players last 72 hours.

Chapter Three masterfully breaks down
for an informed (but non-specialist) audi-
ence just how gambling machines operate
and their increasing complexity through re-
cent history, while describing how the ra-
tionalized chance at the heart of gambling
machines' programs is in fact re-enchanted
through greater and greater obscuring and
reordering of odds because it is at "once
programmed and capricious" (p. 85). The
chapter focuses on how players' perceptions
are manipulated through various mathemat-
ical operations. A striking (but standard) ex-
ample of mathematical ingenuity allows
machines to display "near misses" when in
fact there have been none. Employing an
impressive knowledge of legal argumenta-
tion that delivers profound insight into con-
temporary perceptions of event and chance,
Schüll explains why these manipulations
were allowed only if they occurred at the
very moment when the machines decided if
a player had won, it being illegal to make
them subsequently, to "reassure" a losing

player. The manufacture of enchanted and
pure moments, even if fraudulent, was ac-
ceptable. The language and ideas are those
of designers and manufacturers, displaying
their own individual bemusement and en-
chantment, opening a space for the more
thorough exploration of players' perceptions
of their experiences and chances that fol-
lows.

If chapters one to three seem a little tech-
nologically determinist when summarized,
Chapter Four brilliantly describes how dif-
ferent games involving elements of apparent
skill appeal to different people, and how the
games respond to the growing "sophistica-
tion" of their patrons. We see how the pat-
tern of wins and losses, the "reward sched-
ule," is delicately programmed to keep
different kinds of players going on and on,
so that players are encouraged to "like the
feel of the maths" (p. 109). Schüll argues
that new innovations in machine design do
not conform to existing market preferences,
but transform those preferences in a tight
feedback loop as players get used to certain
styles and speeds of play only to desire
more and more stimulation in an attempt to
inhabit an ever-receding zone. Probably the
most persuasive part is where Schüll brings
together material from previous chapters to
describe how placing a number of bets on a
single spin characterizes a move from an
axis of singular monetary wins to an axis of
temporal duration, i.e., toward "the zone."

Chapter Five marks a shift in "focus from
the *products* of player-centric design to the
process" (p. 138), putting into context the
gambling industry's revelation that ma-
chines and their accouterments could act as
electronic surveillance devices. Collecting

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systematic data led to a plethora of numbers without any obvious means to decipher them, which to this reviewer appeared to mirror the excess of information that machines display to customers. Schüll instead concentrates upon the asymmetric collusion of gamblers and industry through choices offered to consumers that are logged in deeply personal player profiles through loyalty card schemes. Networked machines became a central nervous system, linking marketing, data gathering and sales, and video screens that recognize faces; card-carrying gamblers reveal preferences, which then play out in the win rate of whichever machines they choose thereafter.

From Chapters Six onward Schüll progressively opens out from the logic of machines and designers to players and their lives. Chapter Six explores the increasing array of elements within a game that a player can influence and how these points of decision facilitate entry into their "zone." Gambling machines respond to choices immediately, and consequently players describe themselves as an extension of machines. Players feel that machines destroy the discontinuous moment and smooth out person

and time alike, fostering "a state in which alterity and agency recede" (p. 175). Seven begins an account of what machine life can tell us about the wider context of gamblers' lives that takes up the rest of the book. Desire for "time-on-device" and deliberate disregard of losses belies the culturally determining model of a self-maximizing, risk-managing individual with which I began this review. Gambling machines, as a form of "technologically contrived contingency management" (p. 192), multiply the same kinds of choices these people face in the rest of their lives. In so doing, players actually shut out those worldly concerns, because each choice in-game is a choice to continue "the zone," and to turn money into mere counters in a game, even while submitting to a machine-formatted medium of denouement. Chapter Eight uses Freud (successfully, at least for this non-expert) to flesh out the paradoxical sense of control gamblers feel when they play machines, which they attribute to the fact that they know they are going to lose.

In Chapters Nine and Ten particularly, the book's analysis of "the zone" aims to "offer a window onto the kinds of contingencies and anxieties that riddle contemporary American life, and the kinds of technological encounters that individuals are likely to employ in [their] management" (p. 13). Addiction and its treatments are shown to be couched in the same language of actuarial self-management as gambling is, completing the circuit of entrapment that Schüll uses as the conceit for the book. Here Schüll dances expertly amid thorny ethical grounds and refuses to shy away from exposing blatant hypocrisy, most notably in

the work of the industry-affiliated spearhead of gambling studies: Howard Shaffer. Schüll reveals the means by which the gambling industry manipulates opportunities for funding so that research is forced to concentrate on individual's propensities to addiction and to steer clear of the interplay of machine and person. She argues that the lack of an obvious intra-bodily aspect in this "behavioral" kind of addiction has either led or enabled researchers to put their focus on the biological make-up of individuals and drawn attention away from the substantive manipulation of people by gambling machines. What results from the analysis is a nuanced theorization of a society-wide cognitive dissonance between self-regulation and addiction.

The general (and quite conservative, given the explosive material) argument is that machine gamblers reduce risk to a certainty: win or lose, the game has pre-described outcomes that allow players to self-equilibrate. And yet machines, with their vastly accelerated pace of interaction, are apt to make those who are susceptible to addiction become addicted more quickly and more deeply. (Such is the extent of their entwinement that some players urinated on themselves over and again for fear of losing "the zone" even for a toilet break.) In Schüll's account the revenue-addicted gaming machine industry consciously guides patrons' behavior into a zone of maximal disenfranchisement; addicted gamblers are complicit in their search for a zone outside of actuarial self-management, and once inside, machine designers attempt to hold them beyond their desired, actuarial bounds. Within lays an implicit critique of

the notion of "casino capitalism," because in the end it is casinos that routinize and manage risk. It is not simply a morality tale of how one kind of gaming became inevitably more popular than another through its propensity to make profit; it is instead a history of how the technology and experience of gambling has changed as designers and players aware of the potentials of the new technology colluded (asymmetrically) to serve their mutual desire for "time-on-device" and the thrill of contingent choice. And yet, as Schüll expertly brings home, the asymmetry of the collusion generates not only huge profits, but a subject who is consumed while an industry is enlightened with data and enriched with cash in a "zone" that is an end for one and a means to another. My only frustration in reading the book (symptomatized by its circuitous framing) is that the author seemed herself unsure about how to situate the book beyond this argument, resting too heavily on conspicuous references to Deleuze at the beginning and end of chapters without sufficient substantiation. I saw, in the way machines and people formatted thought and placed reciprocal boundaries upon each other, the seeds of an ethnographic theory that has much wider significance than the author allowed.

Addiction by Design is so comprehensive an account, and written with such apparent ease, that it will appeal to not only anthropologists of the contemporary United States, to historians of the twentieth century, economic and medical anthropologists, to those in gambling studies and in addiction studies (though these are wide markets indeed), but also to science and technology studies, computer science, and to those in

search of an accessible contemporary ethnography for students new to anthropology; what is more, I wholeheartedly recommend it to the informed gambler.

Anthony J. Pickles received his PhD from the University of St. Andrews in 2013 and is beginning a fellowship at Trinity College, University of Cambridge. His thesis is a study of how once-exogenous gambling in Highland Papua New Guinea has become part of socially significant value transformations, and his publications include articles in *JRAI* (in press) and *Oceania* (2009). His interests include Papua New Guinea, gambling, money, contingency, exchange, the gift, and pockets.