

## BOOK REVIEW/ COMPTE RENDU

**Schull, Natasha Dow.** *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012. 456 pp., \$24.95 paperback (9780691160887)

**A***ddiction by Design*, the title promising a discussion of machine gambling in Las Vegas, does that, and very much more. As one of the largest consumer industries in the world, gambling in its various forms calls forth critical analyses of its commodification, and Schüll provides this for electronic machines. Certainly the video gaming market is huge as well, and offers experience for sale, however the electronic gambling machines offer a powerful form of experiential consumption to consumers, and are highly lucrative for the providers. Typically these machines are found in casinos, sophisticated technologically- and psychologically-framed environments where no physical good is sold, but where the product is the opportunity to wager on chance. The casino itself—every facet of it: its “maze” floor patterns, ceiling heights, “play” space, and machine ergonomics—must be designed to keep the gambling consumer there as long as possible, while they freely expend. Electronic gambling machines, typically the most dominant gambling form in Las Vegas style casinos (found around the world) are the bread and butter of these enterprises, so it is not surprising that much ‘consumer research’ is invested in them. *Addiction by Design* explores this research in depth, interweaving with academic analysis the observations and insights of gambling industry representatives, machine designers, and Las Vegas residents, some of whom, like “Mollie,” whose story begins the book, are hopelessly captured by the seductive technological circuitry the city has to offer. The book is a wonderfully written ethnography of a particular gambling “world,” incorporating fine social theoretical insights—informed by the work of Weber, Deleuze (casinos as “control societies”), and theorists of technology—into its narratives.

The book’s ten chapters are divided among the book’s four parts: Design, Feedback, Addiction, Adjustment. In “Programming Chance: The Calculation of Enchantment” (in Part One: Design), Schüll draws upon the Weberian notion of “disenchantment” to contrast the calculative rationality behind slot machine technology that includes Random Number Generators and virtual mapping technology, with the enchantment that overtakes some gamblers who, initially oriented to winning,

get lost in the “zone.” What counts for these people is not wins, but rather, continuous play in a world unto itself, seemingly divorced from everything else. The zone is, of course, highly profitable for the machine owners, and Schüll explores how the “inner” workings of the machines developed: the contemporary machine operates as a kind of delusion device whereby the appearance of the symbols on the screen bears no representational connection to the technology that is generating the appearances. The inner “rationality” of the machine however does not matter for the player, caught up in technologically-manufactured mystery.

“Live Data: Tracking Players, Guiding Play,” in Part Two: Feedback, is fascinating reading on the evolution of player tracking technologies and the attempts to map and solicit customer behaviour in order to generate more profits. The technology is moving toward just-in-time delivery of games (downloadable into consoles) that fit players’ behaviour patterns and desires. I confess to having laughed at the sinister efforts made by a particular casino to induce longer play: technological player monitoring allows for the awareness of player “pain points” (losing runs) and, at the point where the player could use some encouragement, a “Luck Ambassador” stops by to offer free rewards to keep the player going. It turns out though that for players interested in their serious play, the interruption was an annoyance. Despite the claims by industry representatives that what players want is “entertainment,” what they really desire is continuous play in the “zone.”

Along the way we learn interesting things about local Las Vegas gamblers, such as their preference for video poker machines, typically located in older casinos off the Strip. While offering a more interactive experience than the slots found in the Strip casinos, and designed with a larger payback percentage, video poker players can have longer “time on device” until their money runs out. A small but significant detail here is Schüll’s use of the term gambling rather than gaming in the book title and throughout. Electronic machines often are referred to as electronic gaming machines (EGMs), but there is a politics involved in terminological usage: “gaming” sanitizes gambling of stigmatizing and risk connotations and frames the activity as a game activity, similar perhaps to video gaming. However, it may be the author’s intent to retain a critical perspective by retaining gambling as the preferred usage. A further point needs to be made, and that it is, given the shaping of the electronic machine experience by techno-psychological knowledge—and where the designers and players learn from each other so that time-on-device is privileged over winning, it is difficult to call this activity gambling. It seems that the “risk” involved would be to actually win or come out ahead, since the machines are programmed to deplete the budget. No

matter: what counts is the inculcation and experiencing of the “zone.” At the same time, the idea of the “house edge” appears here through sophisticated behavioural shaping.

Schüll’s theorizing of the meaning of machine gambling goes beyond the narrow psychologization of gambling behaviours, to consider the “life” of machine gambling for people in neoliberal, consumer capitalism—an activity where money buys the time away from everyday life contingencies, but where, at the same time, the machines themselves are very efficient money makers for the providers. To be sure, consumer capitalism seeks to influence consumer desires, but perhaps no legal consumer product colonizes interiority so sophisticatedly as the gambling machines. In Schüll’s depiction of Las Vegas, we find people self-modulating through pharmaceuticals, attending therapy, and facing the difficulty of escaping the lure of the machines, in a city where drug stores double as casinos, and some casinos double as drug stores, dispensing pills and oxygen for gamblers who have accrued enough player points. Machine gambling thus produces particular ways of life, including self-actuarializing citizens, “economizing” their lives so they can get to the machines, and into the “zone.”

The ties between the gambling industry and the medicalization of gambling are also discussed with industry-funded research organizations taking on and promoting the position that gambling problems inhere in a small percentage of individuals (the “pathological” gamblers), a position contradicted by the efforts to promote “responsible gambling” (by some of these same organizations) that implies that everyone is at risk of gambling excess and that gambling behaviours can be controlled by the individual. The framing of gambling problems in any case is an individualizing discourse, well-suited to our neoliberal times.

*Addiction by Design* is a pleasure to read, its discussions informed by social theory, technology studies and philosophy. While it will certainly be of interest to scholars of gambling and addiction studies, its reach is broader than this, a commentary on consumer capitalism and the ethos of neoliberalism. It will thus appeal to scholars and students interested in topics such as knowledge economies, the immaterialization of labour, consumption, risk, the sociology of technology, and neoliberal culture. It will also interest anyone interested in Las Vegas itself as a cultural phenomenon—a city at the forefront of the interplay of consumption, technology, and behavioural surveillance.

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