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Maryland gamblers could be hooked on slots

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WASHINGTON - Slot machines, like the ones Gov. Martin O'Malley wants to bring to Maryland, are "rigged" and designed to create addiction, said the National Coalition Against Gambling Expansion on Friday.

"The aim of these technologies is to get people to play longer, faster and more intensely," said Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Natasha Schull.

Schull spoke at a news conference at the National Press Club in Washington, introducing her research showing electronic gambling machines to be habit-forming as part of a wider effort by the coalition to arrest the tide toward gambling expansion.

Schull attended Gambler's Anonymous meetings in Las Vegas while researching a book on the move from social gambling to machine gambling and discovered a trend in the addicts: "90 percent of them were exclusively video gambling."

Game designers planned for that trend, Schull said, and looked for ways to exploit it.

"The industry term is 'play to extinction,'" Schull said. "I'm neither anti-technology nor anti-gambling, but it seems like each gambler is seen as a potential addict."

Playing longer doesn't necessarily increase a gambler's chances, said Roger Horbay, president of Game Planit Interactive Corp. - at the news conference.

"There are only a handful of people in the gaming industry that know how the machines work," Horbay said.

Some customers like the losing better than the winning, Schull said.

"I spoke to one woman who didn't like winning because it interrupted the flow," Schull said. "The change girls had to come back over and fill up the hopper."

Maryland is surrounded by states that have legalized slot machines, including Pennsylvania, Delaware and West Virginia.

"Maryland is hot for us right now," said Field Director Tom Grey.

Three governors were elected in 2002 to bring the gambling industry to their respective states of Pennsylvania, Kansas and Maryland, Grey said.

“Maryland was the only one that (slot opponents) held,” Grey said.

Former Gov. Robert Ehrlich attempted to get slots into Maryland repeatedly during his term - the first for a Republican governor in more than a generation.

Now Democrat O’Malley has taken over the effort, calling for slot machine revenue to help cover a \$1.7 billion budget shortfall. Governors in Massachusetts and Illinois are trying to do the same.

“We have three progressive governors ready to mug their own citizens,” Grey said.

O’Malley has floated the idea of giving \$6 million to programs for problem gamblers to help minimize the potential addiction problems.

“The governor is a realist,” said Rick Abbruzzese, O’Malley spokesman. “He realizes that there may be some social costs because of slot machines and that’s why he’s included those funds.”

The future for expansion isn’t clear, Abbruzzese said, noting that if there was expansion, it would hopefully be localized, pointing at surrounding states.

“Is the potential there for expansion? Yes,” Abbruzzese said. “But if you look at other states, there hasn’t been widespread expansion.”

But Grey warned that once gambling gets into an area, it’s there to stay and will only expand.

“You can’t be a little bit pregnant,” Grey said. “Once one part of the state gets gambling, then other parts of the state are going to start pushing for it. Baltimore is going to start wondering why it can’t mug its own people before they go somewhere else to get mugged.”