Big Losers

The casino industry's ideal customers

Asst. Prof. Natasha Schull has studied gambling in Las Vegas for 15 years. Photo: Ed Quinn

Natasha Schull, who was raised in New York's Greenwich Village, first encountered Las Vegas on the way to college, when her connecting flight was delayed there for a few hours.

"It was the most bizarre place I'd ever been. I wasn't familiar with malls or theme parks or any of the elements that you see exemplified in Las Vegas," she says. "I was immediately *fascinated*." Schull, who has studied gambling in Las Vegas for the past 15 years, is a cultural anthropologist and assistant professor in MIT's Program on Science, Technology, and Society. She recently wrote *Machine Zone: Technology and Compulsion in Las Vegas*, a book based on her research on compulsive gamblers and the engineers who design the slot machines they play. The book will be published next fall.

She also has created a documentary film, *BUFFET: All You Can Eat Las Vegas*, which aired recently on PBS. Her current work focuses on the social dimensions of neuroscience, specifically neuroeconomics, neuromarketing, and addiction pharmacology.

Schull says that the casino industry is building gambling machines that are increasingly effective at taking gamblers' money. Slot machines, which now earn more than 75 percent of casino revenue, are designed to make people play longer, faster, and more intensively. "The ideal customer is someone who sits at a machine until their money is gone," she says. "In the industry it's called "player extinction," and that's the aim.

BECOMING DEPENDENT

"I don't think the gambling industry is an evil empire intentionally trying to addict people," Schull says. "What they're trying to do is maximize profit. But when you mix maximizing profit with the design of a human-machine interface, and then you add people who are looking for escape, it's a perfect storm of elements to produce a situation of dependency." Schull thinks it's telling that we speak about problem gamblers but not problem machines, problem environments, or problem business practices.

"Since addiction is a relationship between a person and an object or activity, it makes sense to take a close look at the gambling technology — not just the gamblers."

As Schull explains, today's machines are much different from ones of the past. Visual graphics are now calibrated so the gamblers' eyes won't get tired so quickly. Sound is manipulated as well, to reduce the stress of cacophony in cavernous spaces. To facilitate faster play, today's machines have buttons and touch-screens instead of handles and mechanical reels.

Instead of coins, they accept player credit cards. Instead of a few games per minute, it is now possible to play hundreds. Inside the machines, complicated algorithms control the odds.

"Every feature of the machines is geared to keep people playing until they're broke."

A STATE OF FLOW

In an effort to pull in revenue for state coffers, Massachusetts, along with several other states, including Kentucky, Illinois, and Maryland, recently had plans to license casinos, she says. "If you actually do the math, it's not really a viable economic solution to the woes of state finance. What it offers, though, is a very tempting immediate injection of cash."

Schull herself is not a gambler, but says she can relate to gamblers when they talk about the repetitive, absorbed relationship they enter into with the technology. "I think many of us understand what it's like to zone out on machines.

"The experience they describe is not unlike the sense of flow people experience when they dance, paint, or write. It's sometimes a glorious thing to be swept away by something for hours. Sometimes you come out with a wonderful product. But the gamblers don't have a product. They emerge from the zone totally depleted — physically, mentally, and financially. They feel drained and empty. In effect, these machines exploit the very human desire to become absorbed."

by Liz Karagianis