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Digitally Enhanced Addiction

By David Wescott

Las Vegas has long been representative of a changing America. In 1985 the cultural critic Neil Postman weighed in: "Today, we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor of our national character and aspiration." In the 90s, the casino tycoon Steve Wynn described the city as "a perfect reflection of America." At the core of these comparisons is the meteoric expansion of modern gambling; the industry Las Vegas is known for has expanded radically in the digital age. Some have called Las Vegas the capital of the postindustrial economy, "the new Detroit."

Natasha Dow Schüll, a cultural anthropologist, explores the city's signature industry in **Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas** (Princeton University Press). Is the city "a shape-shifting marvel of human inventiveness and technological sophistication," "a dystopic instantiation of consumer capitalism," or some combination of the two?, asks the author, an associate professor in the program in science, technology, and society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

At the heart of that question is the increasingly digital nature of casino gambling. Such gambling is a tourist activity, a curiosity, a compulsion, and in every case, Schüll explains, the landscape of the casino floor is undergoing a radical redesign. The blackjack and poker tables of yore are being replaced with machines; a "kind of technological deforestation." Table games like roulette and baccarat are giving way to digitally enhanced video gambling consoles, the so-called crack cocaine of gambling. The human consequences, Schüll believes, have been devastating.

In a phone interview, the scholar describes how her study of interior design and marketing aided her anthropological research. While gambling addiction has been widely researched by psychologists, Schüll brings a new focus to the object side of the equation. She's interested in gambling machines, their designers, their users, and the interactions between these parties. In her years as a researcher of gambling behavior, she has spent a great deal of time both in tourist casinos and "off the strip," in establishments more likely to be frequented by local gamblers. Still, when I ask Schüll for her thoughts on recent legislation to expand gambling, like in a Maryland ballot initiative, she is noncommittal. "I see it as more of a consumer-protection issue."

Randy Adams, the "idea guy" for a company called Anchor Gaming, has been called the "Michelangelo of slots." Adams, who looks "not unlike Gene Wilder's Willy Wonka," according to Schüll, cut his teeth attending meetings held by gambling addicts in the 1980s, pretending to be one of them. Pleading his innocence, Adams claims he merely "wanted to find out about the compulsive side," not to cause it. According to one panelist at a World Gaming Expo, Adams "really knows how to get in the head of a 50-year-old woman and figure out what she wants."

The insights made by experts like Adams have led to wide-ranging technological innovations in the gambling industry. Instead of betting coins or paper money, gambling machines accept magnetic cards that are preloaded with value. The permutations of betting options are more or less endless. Indeed, gambling machines are now used to fulfill every possible need a person could have: drinks, assistance, and more money are only button-pushes away. (One intractable problem for gambling console designers: people's need for bathrooms.) Gambling experts have other tools as well. Architecture and ambience are rigorously tested and perfected; live data feeds allow for players to be tracked and analyzed. "The data is unprecedented," Schüll writes.

All of this is done to maximize "time-on-device." Why? Researchers have found that if users play for long periods, their performance suffers. As one casino consultant put it, "I want to keep you there as long as humanly possible—that's the whole trick, that's what makes you lose."

Addiction by Design features extensive interviews with gamblers, some of them addicts. One woman, given the pseudonym Lola, explained what she likes about video gambling consoles: "It's a wonderful product, it's sleek, attractive; every 10 minutes it gives you a little something, and you don't have to put in coins—I hate dirty hands." One interviewee, called Mollie, describes the overlap between her daily routine and gambling. She pumps gas and gambles at the local 7-Eleven; she buys groceries and gambles at the supermarket; she works at the MGM Grand. Mollie, a veteran gambler, has moved past the excitement of winning. Why does she play? "To keep playing—to stay in that machine zone where nothing else matters." Schüll makes much of this "machine zone," defining it as an "existential no-man's-land" in which human interaction does not disturb the almost sacred machine-human connection.

"Most of us have been in that zone at some point," Schüll says. She brings in Deleuze, Foucault, and Arendt, among others, to explore the theoretical implications of the machine zone, many of which are grim. The book explains that the psychological consequences so evident in the gambling industry pervade all of our lives in one way or another. For Schüll, playing video games, checking eBay auctions with religious regularity, or even compulsively checking e-mail reveal some of the same "intimate entanglements between people and technology."

"This is not just about a few sorry addicts."