

The Best Book I Read This Year

Staff selections from a year of reading

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***Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* by Natasha Dow Schüll**

Two books stand out among everything I read this year. The first you know: Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge*. The second, you probably don't: Natasha Dow Schüll's *Addiction by Design*. Since you can read a [definitive review](#) of Pynchon's novel by David Auerbach in *The American Reader*, I'll focus my comments here on *Addiction by Design*.

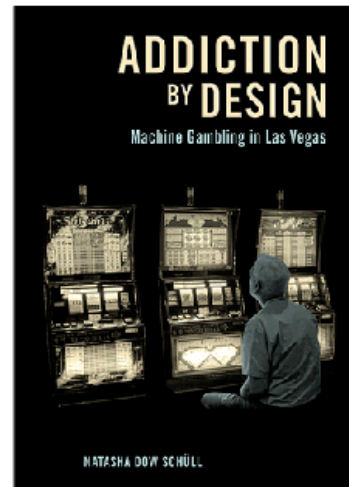
Schüll is an anthropologist at MIT, and she studies people in extreme artificial environments—namely, Las Vegas casinos. She looks at how the gambling companies engineer behaviors as they simultaneously create and satisfy human desires. The core of her critique is that "giving people what they want" is never as simple as it seems. And the new tools of the digital age (machines, data, algorithms, interfaces) make a level of *emotional* precision possible that just did not exist in the analog era.

Her work shows that "what people want" out of a slot machine is *not* the payout, but the experience of receiving feedback. Players call the altered mental state that the slot machines induce The Zone, where everything but the machine disappears. And companies have gotten much, much better at delivering people there faster and holding them there longer.

Though her book is nominally about the development of digital slots, the implications of her work reach into every interaction we have with an engineered artificially intelligent system like Facebook or Netflix or (soon) your car or home. These systems train humans with imperfect, fast payouts that leave us wanting more. They can create what I call "coercive loops," that begin with an intent (see a friend's baby pictures) outside the machine's world, but quickly begin to operate on the machine's logic (click more pictures!).

If books can be tools, *Addiction by Design* is one of the foundational artifacts for understanding the digital age—a lever, perhaps, to pry ourselves from the grasp of the coercive loops that now surround us.

—Alexis C. Madrigal, senior editor



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