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Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas.

By Natasha Dow Schüll. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012.
Pp. xii+442. \$35.

Based on fifteen years of ethnographic work, *Addiction by Design* is an ambitious and thought-provoking book that challenges the neoliberal ethos currently governing the way in which governments and professionals think about gambling addiction. This ethos frames gamblers as consumers who can choose to gamble responsibly with the help of experts and good business practices. Problem gamblers, by extension, are a minority who exhibit a psychological affinity toward addiction. On the contrary, Natasha Schüll argues that addiction is not an internalized psychological state of the individual, but a result of the interaction between humans and machines. This relationship is interdependent but not symmetrical. Thus, while slot machines are designed to place the gambler in a state of “continuous productivity” in order to extract maximum value from extended periods of play, gamblers seek out these machines in order to enter a self-liquidating psychosomatic state (the “zone”) which is an end in itself. This perverse relationship of “asymmetrical collusion” reveals itself only at the end when the gambler’s funds are depleted. The machine becomes inert and unresponsive, and the gambler is forced to economize on real life in order to re-enter the zone.

The book is divided into four sections which build up this concept of “asymmetrical collusion” from different perspectives. In the first two sections, Schüll examines how various experts design environments and tech-

nologies to maximize “time-on-device.” Moving from the casino floor to the slot machine to its internal mechanisms, Schüll reveals the strategies whereby designers create immersive environments that draw gamblers and encourage them to play for long, uninterrupted periods of time. She traces a continual feedback loop, akin to operant conditioning, whereby designers modify machines to give what gamblers want, while gamblers develop “machine tolerance” that provokes further innovations. Some of these insights seem to be presaged by popular myths, but Schüll is the first to have marshaled substantial empirical and ethnographic data to reveal the role of the industry in shaping gambling habits, including addiction.

In the last two sections, Schüll turns her attention to the addicts. Rather than treating them as passive victims in need of therapy, she reveals in rich ethnographic detail the inner struggles of these people. Her ethnographic account shines here, showing us how intensive machine gambling both suspends and refracts key elements of contemporary capitalist society. Thus, the demands of calculative rationality do not dissipate in the “zone.” Rather, the exercise of choice and control, distilled and formatted by digital technology, becomes the very medium of compulsion. In another twist to conventional wisdom, Schüll’s ethnography of an addiction therapy group shows how recovery and addiction share similar assumptions and practices, to the extent that the serene state of self-control exercised through therapy becomes very similar to the suspended state of the machine zone.

Schüll poses many questions to the professionalization of addiction. She convincingly shows that culpability cannot be isolated to individuals, but is shared among all who play a role in the business of commercialized gambling. Her reflexive stance is welcome in an industry that is often highly defensive. But Schüll’s relationships with her diverse informants are not evenly explicated. She seems most sympathetic with the gamblers, whose narratives figure prominently in her arguments. Suspicions are not raised as to the kinds of misrepresentations that might mediate the ethnographer-informant relationship. With the industry experts, Schüll is also sometimes insufficiently critical. For example, she relies primarily on the works of Bill Friedman to draw out the principles of casino design. Yet Friedman represents only one school of thought that is currently heavily contested. Professionals tend to aggrandize their roles in this highly competitive industry.

Though the stories of addicts who play themselves into bankruptcy and cardiac arrests might seem a case in the extreme, *Addiction by Design* provides sobering insights into the machine-mediated world that we all inhabit. Throughout the book, Schüll connects her ethnographic observations to larger debates on contemporary capitalism, in particular the neoliberal ethos of self-regulating subjects and the capitalization of con-

sumers' affective capacities. By traveling deep into the hitherto hidden bowels of the Las Vegas gambling industry, we begin to recognize disturbing everyday scenes when we tune into our laptops, iPods, and Facebook accounts.

KAH-WEE LEE

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Kah-Wee Lee is an assistant professor in the Department of Architecture, National University of Singapore. He works on the history of the control of vice and the spread of the Las Vegas model of casino gambling to Asia-Pacific today.
