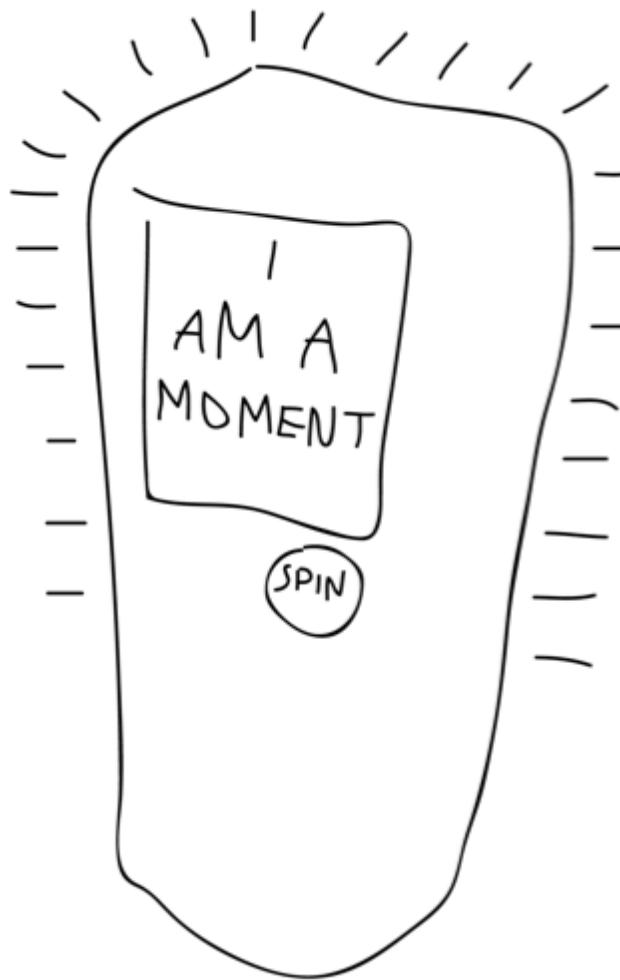


Harmlessly in the 'zone': what is preventing the creation of the benign gambling machine?



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Introduction

I spent this summer in a gambling clinic – The National Problem Gambling Clinic: the NHS's only service for treating gambling addicts. I was there as a service designer, rather than a patient. Every Tuesday morning, for several months, I would sit in on the clinic's weekly assessment meetings. In each of these two hours, I was routinely humbled – hearing the team of psychiatrists and psychologists recall stories of lives damaged and numbed by gambling.

Not a week would go by without several accounts of people said to be addicted to fixed odds betting terminals (FOBT, pronounced FOB-T), video roulette machines (Figure 1). They have been described by journalist Amelia Gentlemen as 'the crack cocaine of gambling'¹ and by Labour leader Ed Milliband as 'spreading like an epidemic'.² The strangest thing is they are not trying to describe an illegal drug or the newest strain of a deadly virus. They are talking about a video game. Some argue what players are actually addicted to, to be something called the 'zone':³ a trance like state where one can 'suspend time, space, monetary value, social roles and sometimes even ones' very sense of existence'.⁴

¹ Amelia Gentleman, "Roulette machine: the crack cocaine of gambling," *The Guardian*, 27 May 2013.

² Ed Milliband, *Labour would give councils power to ban roulette machine*, 20 December 2013.

³ Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2012), p.12.

⁴ ibid



Figure 1: The Guardian, Man plays on a FOBT, 6 January 2014.

The critics above, along with campaign groups, mental health professionals and to an extent myself, are concerned about the apparent harm these machines are causing. Whether FOBTs are actually doing financial, psychological and/or social harm is not for journalists, politicians or me to decide. It has to be proved and his credit and in amongst much political point scoring,⁵ David Cameron has said he is awaiting empirical evidence before he and his government make any major decisions on the future of these machines.⁶ This information is coming later this year in the form of a £500,000 study⁷ by the charity the Responsible Gambling Trust – with the hope of finding an answer to 'Can we distinguish between harmful and non-harmful gaming machine play?'^8

⁵ Randeep Ramesh, "David Cameron 'shares Ed Miliband's concerns about gambling machines'," The Guardian, 8 January 2014.

⁶ David Cameron, Prime Minister's Questions, 08 January 2013.

⁷ <http://www.responsiblegamblingtrust.org.uk/Research> (accessed 8 August 2014)

⁸ ibid

So what if FOBTs *were* found to be as damaging as some of the language to describe them suggests? This leaves a fascinating scenario: the British government believing historically that ‘we cannot eliminate risk, we have to live with it, manage it’,⁹ does not ban these machines, but insists that they be made more harmless. Is this even possible, a benign gambling machine? A harmless ‘zone’? And if so, what or maybe even who would prevent it coming to pass? This is what I will attempt to answer in this paper.

I want to use this paper to gain an awareness of the larger forces influencing the phenomenon of problem gambling and give myself some context as to what happened to the dozens of individuals I have met and thousands of others with this illness. I wish to learn something of how a complex issue like addiction is recognised and addressed by politics and business today. I wish to understand not only the macroscopic dimension of gambling addiction but the microscopic too. Nicotine, alcohol and opium: these are fundamentally what get people hooked to cigarettes, booze and heroin. But a FOBT, what is its active ingredient? Never having really seen the appeal of gambling, by researching for and writing this paper, I hope to become more empathetic to problem gamblers.

⁹ Clare Herrick, *Governing Health and Consumption: Sensible Citizens, Behaviour and the City*, (Bristol: Policy Press, 2011) p.1.

Despite working several months within a service that treats gambling addiction, I will not reference my research from there in this paper. This is due in most part to respect the privacy of patients, but also to avoid giving the impression that I have any real professional knowledge of pathological gambling and how it should be treated. Although I will be the first to admit, the experience has given me some bias against FOBTs, gambling and the industry as a whole. This leads on well to explain that my research for this essay has been almost exclusively secondary. The debate around FOBTs is very current and is yet to reach any sort of conclusion. As a result of this, much of my research has had to been done online. Theories found in the literature have been used to help me make sense of journalism covering the debate. To analyse research, I have tried to take a reductive approach breaking what I find into smaller parts, so they may be understood more easily. This is not to say I will not consider the relationships between different parts, how they influence one another and act as whole.

The invention of e-cigarettes has birthed ‘safer’¹⁰, yet still enjoyable, smoking. Are gambling machines, which appear as harmful as FOBTs, capable of a similar journey? Examining this will this hopefully contribute to the sociological debate about how we reassess risk in connection to the activities we have come to enjoy. Problem gambling here is discussed anthropologically

¹⁰ Ash: Action on Smoking and Health (charity), “Briefing – Electronic Cigarettes (also known as vapourisers).”, *Ash: Action on Smoking and Health (charity)*, June 2014, p.1.

and although psychology of this behaviour has been studied, I do not claim to be making any new contribution to this field. Design politics will be touched upon in this paper, giving a new case study of how the political process mutates the DNA of products or services. Increasing in importance to design for complex issues, systems thinking will be a theme of this work with discussion of how the redesign of product or service might involve changing the systems in which they are used.

To explore whether the benign gambling machine could exist, I of course first need to do a thorough biopsy of the FOBT. I need to understand deeply its design, interactions and the apparent active ingredient, 'the zone'. In the second part, I visit the high-street bookmakers – looking not only at them as a designed environment that homes the FOBT. I also look at these as politically and morally contentious places, evolved through profit seeking and regulation. Thirdly, I will delve into gambling when seen as a problem asking what we mean when we describe something as harmful and why and what gets this label. To conclude, I will consider the challenges the designer of the benign gambling machine might have to overcome, their chances of failure and what talents they will need to possess were he or she to succeed.

Part One: At the Machine

Can what makes the FOBT harmful be separated from what makes it rewarding to play? To really know this we would have to be able to identify its harmful parts and its rewarding parts and also have the possibility of separating them. Some parts maybe both, thus lowering the likelihood of the benign gambling machine (BGM). Let's start by examining the FOBT's physical characteristics, its body parts. Then we will work our way up from there to its mind and relationships.

1.1 FOBT Biopsy

Like how a poppy is a member of the Papaveraceae plant family, the FOBT belongs to a larger group of devices known as 'Electronic Gambling Machines'¹¹ (Figure 2) or EGM's. Several features unite this group. First of all EGMs are intended for the sole purpose of gambling, unlike other electronic machines, say laptop computers, which have many purposes, although they can be used for gambling by virtue of the internet and online betting. Secondly, the money to play these machines is inserted directly into them by the player. There is no croupier taking chips, no bookmaker receiving cash over the counter, no middleman between a person's money and the gambling event they stake it on. Lastly, an EGM generates a gambling event with its circuitry through direct physical instruction from a player – the pulling of a leaver; the tapping of a screen; the pushing of the 'spin' bottom.

¹¹ Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2012), p.16.



Figure 2: New York Times, Electronic Gambling Machine, 12 April 2006.

Now what apparently marks the FOBT out from its EGM relatives, and makes it more addictive are two things: offering easy and convenient access to play exciting casino games like roulette and their 'high stakes, high speed' play.¹² We will get onto this a little later.

A FOBT in front of you, what will you see? There is no subtlety in design, that is for sure: a colourful, flashing array of screens, backlit buttons that are difficult to ignore (Figure 3). Within the primal draw of moving light and colours, the machine explicitly advertises itself, its play and rewards – 'CHOOSE TO GAMBLE AND WIN UP TO £500!'¹³ (Figure 4), 'INSERT YOUR RECEIPT TO CONTINUE PLAYING'¹⁴ (Figure 5), 'NEW ROULETTE SUPER GAMBLER' (Figure 6), 'ROULETTE SPIN & WIN', '£500 JACKPOT – FIND YOUR

¹² Randeep Ramesh, "David Cameron 'shares Ed Miliband's concerns about gambling machines'," The Guardian, 8 January 2014.

¹³ <http://www.itv.com/news/meridian/topic/fixed-odd-betting-terminals/> (accessed 3 October 2014)

¹⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2013/nov/08/gambling-machines-drug-money-laundering-bookies> (accessed 3 October 2014)

'POT OF GOLD HERE!' (Figure 7), 'ROULETTE – PLAY NOW WIN UP TO £500!' (Figure 8) Although these messages and visual cues may tempt and trigger play, it's a harder argument to claim they are what cause problem gamblers like Nicola Grice to lose themselves in FOBTs for days at a time; '[I] arrive at the bookies as it opened at 8am and staying till closing time at 10pm'.¹⁵ That is not to say luring adverts are not harmful. They glamorise and encourage FOBT play and though they publicise its rewards, they are not rewards in themselves.



Figure 3: Ian Sutton, Ladbrokes FOBTs, 28 April 2014.

¹⁵ Lena Corner, "Should fixed odds terminals - the "crack cocaine" of betting - be banned from the high street?", The Independent, 4 June 2014.



Figure 4: ITV, Medway's gambling fears, 6 February 2013



Figure 5: Guardian, Fixed odds betting terminals, 8 November 2013



Figure 6: The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, FOBT, 24 July 2014



Figure 7: The Guardian, FOBT ad, 07 October 2013.



Figure 8: PoliticsHome, FOBT advert, 10 January 2014.

The FOBT has comparable proportions to a human. Appearing almost deliberately anthropomorphise in their design they stand the same height as an upright human (Figure 9) shoulders width wide, tapering at the bottom like legs, down toward the ankles. Some FOBTs even have voices, digital croupiers mimicking real casino environments with audible cues like 'No more bets'.¹⁶ 'Anthropomorphic features in robot design may contribute to [...] comfort for human users'¹⁷ suggests robotic engineers Caroline Hayes and Christopher Miller. A FOBT appearing human is harmful for this very reason – it makes interacting with them feel comfortable, normal for some people. These design features make it difficult for people like Nicola Grice to answer questions such as 'which of the following are socially acceptable to spend an entire day with, a person or a computer game?' 'Objects are being transformed from

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ckVcxypFgl8> (accessed 11th September 2014)

¹⁷ Caroline C. Hayes, Christopher A. Miller, *Human-Computer Etiquette: Cultural Expectations and the Design Implications They Place on Computers and Technology*, (Florida: CRC Press, 2010), p.241.

tools into companions’¹⁸ observes famed curator Paola Antonelli. The harm with the FOBT being a companion is it charges by the minute. Its company can cost thousands a day. Only if its time were not so expensive, this would not be such an issue.

¹⁸ Paola Antonelli, *Talk to Me: Communication Between People and Objects*, (New York, Museum of Modern Art; London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), p.11.



Figure 9: Ladbrokes, Ladbrokes employer with 'Self-Service Betting Terminals', late 2013

Maybe the benign gambling machine should not be so comfortable – physically less equipped for long periods of play or ‘time-on-device’¹⁹ as its known within the gambling industry. The player can stands over the FOBT, in a similar fashion to withdrawing cash from an ATM. More often than not, people play these things on provided bar stools, with backrests and generous padding. The screens are tilted back, enticing a person to stoop forward, filling their field of vision, creating a more immersive effect. The ‘spin’ or bet button (Figure 10) in terms of ergonomics, is placed perfectly – similar to the positioning of mouse to a PC monitor, allowing it to be pressed without effort or strain.

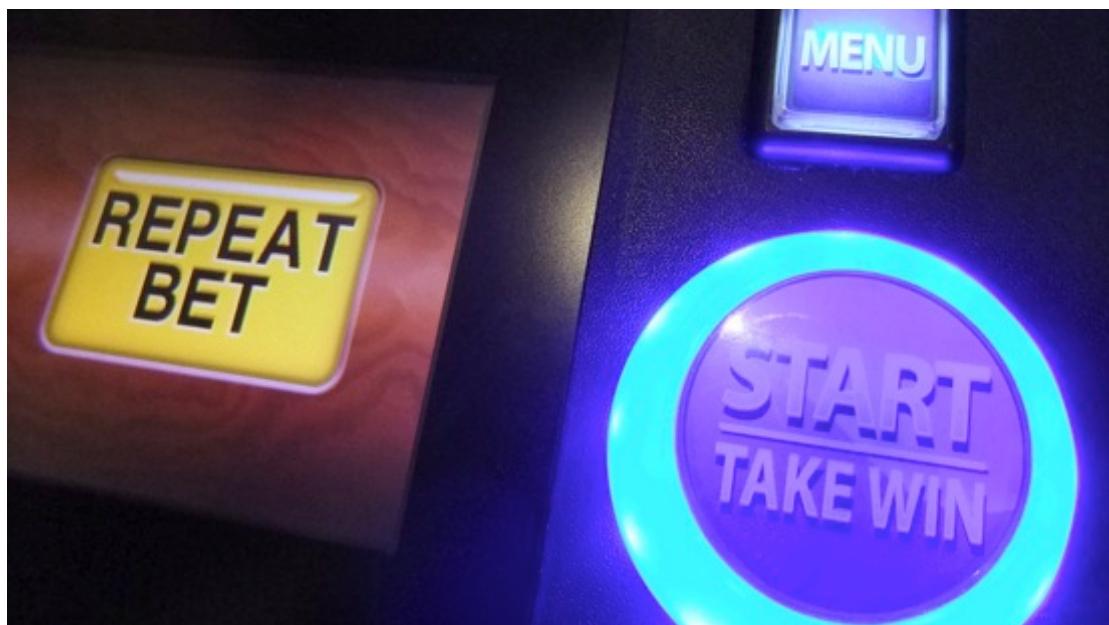


Figure 10: Ian Sutton, spin and repeat buttons, 11 April 2014.

¹⁹ Rebecca Cassidy, Andrea Pisac, Claire Loussouarn, *Qualitative Research in Gambling: Exploring the Production and Consumption of Risk*, (New York,: Routledge, 2013), p.95.

Before getting on to try and separate the harms and rewards of FOBT interactions, which I am beginning to step on the toes of by looking at its different body parts, let's consider one more point. A single design feature or bit of anatomy may not be solely responsible for what makes a FOBT harmful. The effectiveness of one part might be attributed to another. The effect of lurid ad-boards may lie in part with the moving displays of light beneath them. The ability of the device's anthropomorphisms to prolong play could well be built on the shoulder of strong ergonomics. MIT anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll, claims that what makes EGMs addictive more broadly, is not a single component, but a combination of parts 'colluding'²⁰ together to create an overall immersive effect. This complexity, this system of co-dependent organs to carry on with my biopsy analogy, makes the task of disentangling the harm and rewards of FOBTs rather difficult.

1.2 ‘THIS MACHINE IS RANDOM’ – FOBT Interactions

What I hoped I got across above, is what makes a FOBT harmful and rewarding to play lies not so much in its physical parts, but in something beyond them. This something, I believe, is altogether less tangible: its interactions. Let's define these as the point where FOBTs reacts to being interacted with – how it behaves with players and players with it. Exploring this about FOBTs, I will look at their interactions of inserting money, placing

²⁰ Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2012), p.98.

bets and the gambling event it makes. Before doing this though, we will first cover briefly the basics of roulette. The reason being its principles underpin much of FOBT's interaction behaviours.

Roulette involves the unpredictable outcomes of spinning a wheel and a small ball (Figure 11). The wheel is divided into thirty-seven equal sections, each with a recess. Surrounding the wheel is a tilted track. The ball is flung around the track, with the wheel spun in the opposite direction – as the ball loses momentum, it falls onto the wheel, landing in a numbered recess. What people bet on, is which number the ball will end up on. They do this by placing either cash or casino chips on a grid representing the different possible outcomes (Figure 12). The odds of winning (37-1) never change, they are fixed.



Figure 11: National Geographic, Roulette wheel, 2 July 2013



Figure 12: Uptown Entertainment, Roulette betting grid, 28 February 2013

The first FOBT interaction is that with the lurid 'bill acceptor', to steal an American label. Often rimmed with blue light (Figure 13), it is still and calm in and amongst the FOBT's flashing screens and ad placards. These built-in currency detectors are FOBT's petrol caps. The £10s and £20s notes you insert are converted into play credits displayed on the screen above (Figure

14). Although this interaction may seem innocuous, the change it makes in how a player perceives money is important to my question about what in FOBTs cause harm and whether this can be removed. The ‘dematerialisation of money’²¹ has been proved not only in gambling to increase how much we will spend. A study by economists Drazen Prelec and Duncan Simister ‘found that people were willing to pay twice as much to bid on tickers to a Boston Celtics basketball game if they could pay with their credit card rather than cash’.²²



Figure 13: The Guardian, Blue lit bill acceptor, 3 December 2013

²¹ Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2012), p.56.

²² Richard H. Thaler, Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness*, (Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2008), p.143.



Figure 14: ITV, cash to credits, 19 April 2013

This effect of money's perceived value being deflated is not unique to FOBTs amongst EGMs, though that is not to say it is not harmless. What is more distinguishing is the volume or stake size at which FOBTs enable players to disembody money for the sake of gambling – a player can bet up to £100 on the single spin of the roulette wheel. This leads to a more fundamental issue – the harmful access to money. 'It's not just the cash in their pockets no more, we now take debit card payments, which we should have never been started',²³ a betting shop manager reflects about the growth of FOBTs. Maybe banks, pawnshops and payday lenders are partly responsible for problem gambling, in fact addiction. Their cash machines, debit cards, easy lines of credit not only allow us unlimited access to our money, but are indifferent to what we spend it on. This point is brilliantly summarised by stand-up

²³ John Domokos, Randeep Ramesh, Noah Payne-Frank and Mustafa Khalili, "FOBTs: 'the crack cocaine of gambling' – video", 6 April 2014.

comedian Chris Rock back in 2004 at his acclaimed *Never Scared* show (Figure 15),

Here's another thing man, drugs are illegal, but ATM machines are open 24 hours a day. 24 hours a day. For who? Who the fuck is it open for? Have you ever taken out three hundred dollars, at 4 o'clock in the money for something positive?²⁴



Figure 15: Chris Rock, Drugs are illegal, but ATMs are open 24 hours a day, 24 March 2014

This considered, it seems the benign gambling would struggle to exist and be viable within a financial system that makes money like this so readily available. Using the word 'viable' pulls us back to the bill acceptor. Yes they appear to be inherently harmful, giving people the ability to flippantly fill FOBTs with bank notes, as though they were loose change. The problem with excluding them or any other form of payment, is this would render the benign gambling machine financial unviable. Moneyless machines, 'stakeless' betting

²⁴ *Chris Rock: Never Scared*, dir: Joel Gallen, 2004.

is not a business model that this industry would have any incentive to swap for something, like the FOBT, that made £1.5 billion in profit in 2013.²⁵

The FOBT loaded with cash; time to place your bets. First choose from the games options on screen – bingo, horse racing, and fruit machine. You, along with 90% of FOBT users choose roulette.²⁶ Most of the games offered are in fact some form of roulette, giving the impression of more choice than there actually is. Now sit at a virtual roulette table, the grid in front of you, thirty-seven numbers you can play. Making a bet requires the minimal movement of tapping the screen. Each tap returns a satisfying, recorded sound of casino chips being stacked. Some machines even allow you to straddle between these, increasing your options. The value of your tap can be varied from £2 to £20, expanding your potential decisions into the thousands. The point I want to make here is that although a FOBT gives players huge choice, it does not hand over any more control of its outcomes. As sociologist Barry Schwartz argues in the *Paradox of Choice* – ‘increased choices among products and services may contribute little or nothing to the kind of freedom that matters [...] we do ourselves a no favor when we equate liberty too directly with choice, as if we necessarily increase freedom by increasing the number of options available’.²⁷ The way FOBTs use choice is what political philosopher Isaiah Berlin would

²⁵ Chris Rogers, “Gambling industry statistics April 2009 to September 2013”, Gambling Commission, June 2014.

²⁶ <http://www.stopthefobts.org/what-are-fobts/> (accessed 3 October 2014)

²⁷ Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p.4.

have called a ‘Negative Liberty’²⁸ – when an individual exercises their liberty and is interfered with by another, that actually constrains or diminishes it. The illusion of control is harmful for this reason. It makes a player believe that he or she can influence an uncontrollable event – that he or she can beat the FOBT.

A theory by psychological anthropologist Roger Caillois might help us make more sense of this illusion. Caillois stated that all games fall into at least one of the following categories: *Agon* or competition; *Alea* or chance; *Illinx* (Greek for ‘whirlpool’, alternative perception; *Mimicry* or role-playing.²⁹ Roulette is purest alea. However FOBTs have features that imply it has Agon properties or one might call it ‘an element of skill’. Although FOBTs masquerading chance as skill is harmful, this also has some sense of reward, observes renowned psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – ‘Aleatory games are enjoyable because they give the illusion of controlling the inscrutable future.’³⁰ Thus to strip the FOBT of this illusion would make it far less harmful, while equally leaving it less fun to play.

The third interaction, the ‘gambling event’, adds to the FOBT’s misrepresenting its ability to be controlled. This most basic of actions, of pressing the ‘spin’ button is possibly the most unique and harmful aspect of

²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.2.

²⁹ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, (Urbana, Ill: University of Illinois, 2001), p.11.

³⁰ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness: The Classic Work on How to Achieve Happiness*, (Croydon: Harper & Row, 1992 (2002 revised edition)), p.73.

the FOBT. The ball being ‘released’ by the player and not an intermediary like a croupier, makes players bet more and believe they have better odds of winning. This I can say with some certainty, thanks to a study by a group of psychologists:

We have examined the impact of the role assumed by gamblers in our Roulette session. The two groups we put into a situation identical to that of a real casino, with one exception; “active gamblers” from the first group threw the marble themselves, while the croupier [dealer] threw the marble for the gamblers in the second group (the “passive gamblers”). Whether the marble is tossed by the gambler or croupier, the game’s outcome is in no way changed, but the results clearly revealed that players who threw the ball themselves place much higher wagers and overestimated their chances of winning more than gamblers in the second group.³¹

Think harmful how this is. The spin button is a control that isn’t controlling anything. Just by allowing whoever is playing to initiate the toss of the ball, the FOBT can make a person bet more money than they otherwise would have. The issue again lies with whether this action is fun. Unfortunately, for the sake of my question about making a safer FOBT, it would appear so.

³¹ Robert Ladouceur, Caroline Sylvain, Claude Boutin and Celine Doucet, *Understanding and Treating the Pathological Gambler*, (Guildford: John Wiley & Son, 2003), p.6.

Interviewed by Channel 4 News outside a bookmaker in Newham, East London, a young man laughs about why he finds FOBTs addictive to play:

When you spin it, if you lose, you know you think you know where it's going the next place. You think you know what the next number is, so it'll make you go back and play again. You're never right. It's a computer system.³²



Figure 16: Channel 4 News, FOBT punter outside bookmakers in Newham, 8 January 2014

What Stephen (Figure 16) is saying is insightful for a number of reasons. First he indicates here that he knows where the ball will land – that he can predict the unpredictable. This is a real example of how the illusion of control a FOBT player can feel, can be enjoyable. It furthers my point that this false impression of control these machines foster is not only harmful, but also pleasurable. Oddly he appears to enjoy losing, which we will discuss later.

³² Channel 4 News, "Another throw of the dice on 'mini-casino' betting machines", Channel 4, 8 January 2014.

Secondly, Stephen reveals something about his misperception of FOTBS – ‘you’re never right. It’s a computer system.’ You could translate this ‘I don’t realise the FOBT is a computer, so I believe it’s beatable’. Dwell on the fact now that roulette on FOBTs is not real. A white ball is not physically spinning around a wheel and landing on a number. There is no ball. The force of gravity is not governing the result. What you see is a digital process presenting itself as a physical one. What is generating the number is an electromagnetic process inside a microchip, something called a ‘random number generator’ or ‘RNG’.³³ This chip is not even inside the FOBT or the betting shop – ‘once you place your bets, a random result is then generated on a far away server.’³⁴ FOBTs are casinos in the cloud.

Why bother with the presence of a virtual ball taking ten seconds to spin and land, when the instance Stephen hits the ‘spin’ the RNG generates a number that could be plainly displayed on screen? This would diminish Stephen’s false sense of control. Skeumorphism might be harmful as they misrepresents how FOBTs actually work and therefore can be understood and beaten. Anthropologist Natasha Dow Shull says that EMGs appearing somehow analogue is no accident – they are designed this way to ‘accentuate the illusion of control’.³⁵ The FOBT giving off this false impression that works in an analogue way, rather than digitally is a harmful characteristic. We are

³³ J. Edward Crowder, *Casino Gambling: For Fun and Profit*, (Colorado: Outskirts Press, 2006), p.55.

³⁴ John Domokos, Randeep Ramesh, Noah Payne-Frank and Mustafa Khalili, “FOBTs: ‘the crack cocaine of gambling’ – video”, 6 April 2014.

³⁵ Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2012), p.83.

very familiar with the physical world, therefore feel we can understand and master it whereas the digital universe is still a mystery to most of us. Hence if we compete against something digital disguised as something physical, we heighten our belief that we can beat it.

Lastly, Stephen shows how FOBT players see and act upon patterns that do not exist. What he is experiencing is operant conditioning, more specifically the effects of 'schedules of reinforcement'³⁶ - where the action of an organism is always rewarded, thereby increasing the frequency of this action. But the FOBT's financial rewards are not constant - they are utterly random – what experimental psychologist B.F Skinner called 'intermittent reinforcement' schedules. This very randomness of when the FOBT pays out is what captivates gamblers. This is deeply ingrained in what makes gambling as a whole addictive. 'Habitual gamblers are at the mercy of intermittent reinforcement' notes psychologist Michael Domjan.³⁷, The Gambling Commission who regulates bookmakers, is so aware of the power of FOBTs randomness as it demands that each one be labelled with 'This machine is random'³⁸. EGMs being able to capitalise on some gamblers' predisposition to see patterns that aren't there is no mistake – a games developer tells they

³⁶ Charles B. Ferster, Burrhus Frederic Skinner, *Schedules of Reinforcement*, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957), p.5.

³⁷ Michael Domjan, *The Principles of Learning and Behavior: Active Learning Edition*, (California; Cengage Learning, 2009), p.325.

³⁸

<http://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/pdf/Machine%20standards%20category%20B2%20June%202012%20revision%202.pdf> (accessed 18 August 2014)

aim to ‘deliver a good math experience’.³⁹ This suggests what gamblers seek in FOBTs is not riches but randomness - attempting to see order in chaos. This is encouraging because it makes at least one separation between FOBTs’ rewards and the harm of it draining a person of all their money. This rewarding experience belongs to games more broadly. Game historian Zoya offers a perspective - ‘I believe that one of the addictive things about games is that they take hierarchical distinctions out of the hands of fate and put them in the hands of players.’⁴⁰ What exactly is this FOBT experience? What about it do gamblers enjoy?

1.3 The addictive experience – the ‘zone’

What are the properties of this experience, the ‘zone’ as some have dubbed it?⁴¹ Knowing so will help establish whether it is exclusive to those who play on FOBTs. If it is not, maybe there is hope for the benign gambling machine.

So what is it like inside the ‘zone’?

It’s like being in the eye of the storm, is how I’d describe it. Your vision is clear on the machine in front of you but the whole world is spinning

³⁹ Natasha Dow Schüll, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton Press, 2012), p.111.

⁴⁰ Zoya Street, “Gamification in History: Game Mechanics as Social Models”, zoyastreet.com, 11 August 2011. <http://zoyastreet.com/2011/08/23/gamification-in-history-game-mechanics-as-social-models/> (accessed 21 April 2014)

⁴¹ Natasha Dow Schull, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.1.

around you, and you can't really hear anything. You aren't really there—you're with the machine and that's all you're with.⁴²

Interviewed by anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll, problem gambler Mollie describes the 'zone' experience of playing electronic gaming machines in Las Vegas. Mollie details an experience like an immerse focus on the machine. It is so intense that it blurs her awareness of everything else around her. Dow Schüll, in her book *Addiction by Design*, having interviewed dozens of EGM players and addicts, describes this machine 'zone' as thus – 'Everything else falls away. A sense of monetary value, time, space, even a sense of self is annihilated in the extreme form of this zone you enter.'⁴³ But is this the same zone for FOBT players here in the UK – the use of language would seem to say so. Remember Nicola Grice, she described what makes the FOBTs addictive – 'I just wanted to be on the machines. It took over. If you get into that zone you don't care about anything. You just want to play that machine. It's terrible. It's so addictive.'⁴⁴ Both Mollie and Nicola describe a trance like experience where they only care about the machine. Nicola even uses the 'zone' to label it.

When you first play it, it is like a rush. Almost like a drug like experience. Almost get yourself into a trance like state I'd say. You lose your awareness of time and you get caught up in the speed of it. First

⁴² Natasha Dow Schull, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.12.

⁴³ Natasha Dow Schüll, *99% Invisible: Episode 78: No Armed Bandit*, 30 April 2013.

⁴⁴ Lena Corner, "Should fixed odds terminals - the "crack cocaine" of betting - be banned from the high street?", *The Independent*, 4 June 2014.

it's exciting, then its just numbers really. There is a repeat button. You just keep pressing that repeat button.⁴⁵

Here former addict Simon tells of his experience of playing FOBTs – talking about a ‘trance’ like state too. He mentions ‘numbers’, alluding to their importance in making the FOBTs rewarding to play, as I did above. Simon emphasises FOBTs’ ‘speed’, as does journalist Randeep Ramesh when writing on what makes these machine addictive – it is their ‘high-speed, high stakes’.⁴⁶ ‘You lose your awareness of time’ Simon says, as does Dow Schüll in her definition of the ‘zone’.

Reformed gambler Mary Sojourner reflects in her memoir, that ‘a trance like preoccupation in which perpetuating the trance is reward enough’.⁴⁷ This insight and everything else makes me see that Mollie, Nicola and Simon are not gamblers. They are renters. Them feeding money into FOBTs is not about winning, but entering the zone. The gambling industry already designs for customers who ‘play-to-win-to-play’.⁴⁸ The ‘zone’ experience is a pay-as-you-go service; just the rate a player pays for it can be random and costly. Bookmakers could drop the pretence of betting; people could just rent time

⁴⁵ John Domokos, Randeep Ramesh, Noah Payne-Frank and Mustafa Khalili, “FOBTs: ‘the crack cocaine of gambling’ – video”, 6 April 2014.

⁴⁶ Randeep Ramesh, “David Cameron ‘shares Ed Miliband’s concerns about gambling machines’,” The Guardian, 8 January 2014.

⁴⁷ Mary Sojourner, *She Bets Her Life: A True Story of Gambling Addiction*, (California: Seal Press, 2010), p.149.

⁴⁸ Natasha Dow Schull, *Addiction by Design*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.123.

on FOBTs or other ‘zone’ generators on a flat rate. The thing is we consumers in this market economy are already thinking like this – ‘Economics in general are moving from creating goods and delivering services to creating experiences’ writes a sociologist Nigel Thrift.⁴⁹ Business management advisors Pine and Gilmore said in the Harvard Business Review, back in 1999 about the emergence of the ‘Experience Economy’⁵⁰ – how companies should aim not to just deliver services, but ‘stage experiences’. The benign gambling machine should set its sights on becoming an experience.

Now the important question, does the trance experience of the ‘zone’ just belong to FOBTs, EGMs, gambling? Perhaps the strongest evidence of a universal zone is the work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi – his theory and book *Flow* outlines how people can fall into a single-minded concentration when performing tasks - ‘Because of the deep concentration on the activity at hand, the person in flow not only forgets his or her problems, but loses contemporarily the awareness of self.’⁵¹ Sound familiar?

In 2004, at a TED conference, Csikszentmihalyi set rules for achieving *flow* (figure 17):

⁴⁹ Nigel Thrift, “Reinventing Invention: New Tendencies in Capitalist Commodification,” *Economy and Society* Volume 35 (2) (2006): 279-306

⁵⁰ B. Joseph Pine II, James H. Gilmore, “Welcome to the Experience Economy,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 1998.

⁵¹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow; the Psychology of Optimal Experience*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), p.33.

HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE IN FLOW?

1. Completely involved in what we are doing – focused, concentrated.
2. A sense of ecstasy—of being outside everyday reality.
3. Great inner clarity—knowing what needs to be done, and how well we are doing.
4. Knowing that the activity is doable—that our skills are adequate to the task.
5. A sense of serenity—no worries about oneself, and a feeling of growing beyond the boundaries of the ego.
6. Timelessness—thoroughly focused on the present, hours seem to pass by in minutes.
7. Intrinsic motivation—whatever produces flow becomes its own reward.



Figure 17: TED / Cszentmihalyi, 'How does it feel to be in flow?', February 2004

The FOBT zone exhibits all these properties – players become deeply immersed; playing blurs their everyday reality; the credits on screen clarify how they're doing; the rhyme of the spin button is calming; they feel a sense

of timelessness; being in the ‘zone’ is reward in itself. But the same experiential properties arguably belong to playing tennis, meditating, listening to trance music – such activities generally considered harmless or even healthy.

The ‘zone’ experience by all account appears to be a ‘flow’ experience, just in the context of gambling. What is interesting about this, is less the experience has been labelled twice, but how essentially one mental state can be viewed so differently; while Dow-Schüll accounts the ‘zone’ being detrimental, exploitable, Csikszentmihalyi talks of ‘flow’ being the ‘secret to happiness’.⁵² This hints that a harmless, healthier gambling ‘zone’ could exist; it may just be a matter of the context in which people enter it.

⁵² Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow, the Secret to Happiness*, February 2004.

Part Two: Down the Bookmakers

A gambling machine being benign may not be enough – it would have to exist and function in the high street bookmakers. These environments are highly controlled. From outside its branded shop front, there are large forces directly influencing their make up. This section will give context to the environments in which the FOBT is played and debated – to provide a more complete picture of what the benign gambling machines' (BGM's) is up against.

2.1 On The High Street

The betting shop (Figure 18) was only born some sixty years ago. With the intention of taking gambling off the streets and into spaces that could be better regulated, the then UK government created the 1960 Betting and Gaming Act. Once it came into law on May 1st 1961, 'betting shops opened at rate of 100 shops per week'.⁵³ Historian Robert Munting makes the case that – 'With legal and commercially organised off-course betting, the way was open for bookmakers as businesses to develop.'⁵⁴ The number of shops peaked at 1968 at 15,758.⁵⁵ The 1960s saw gambling become corporate – bookmakers Ladbrokes floated on the London Stock Exchange in 1967,⁵⁶ with the rest of

⁵³ BBC News, "On This Day: 1st September 1960 Game on for British betting shops", 1 September 2005.

⁵⁴ Roger Munting, *An Economic and Social History of Gambling in Britain and the USA*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.99.

⁵⁵ Robert Munting, *An Economic and Social History of Gambling in Britain and the USA*, (Manchester: Manchester University Presss, 1996), p.98.

⁵⁶ <http://www.ladbrokesplc.com/about-ladbrokes/history> (accessed 18 September 2014)

what today is known as the 'Big Four' following suit.⁵⁷ 'The 1960 Act legalised betting shops and, despite its original intention, it inadvertently led to an explosion of commercial gaming',⁵⁸ observed a government historian in 2012. Had the government not tried to control gambling, putting it where they could see it, it might have prevented the creation of the multi billion gambling industry we have today – one capable of national advertising, technological innovation and political lobbying. An important lesson for whoever creates the BGM – despite having the purpose to make gambling less of a problem, this can actually somehow make it worse.



Figure 18: Yorkshire Post, A northern William Hill betting office in 1970s, 26 April 2014.

⁵⁷ Robert Munting, *An Economic and Social History of Gambling in Britain and the USA*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), p.99.

⁵⁸ House of Commons: Culture, Media and Sport Committee, *The Gambling Act 2005: A Bet Worth Taking?*, (London: The Stationery Office, 2012), p.3.

Today there are 8700 UK betting shops,⁵⁹ generating £2.3 billion in revenues in 2013.⁶⁰ ‘Shops have evolved. And over the past decade they have become focused less on the bets over the counter and more on the machines in the corner’⁶¹ journalist Matthew Engle, elegantly sums up. These ‘retail environments’⁶² as the Association of British Bookmakers (ABB) call them, are not retail environments, as they do not actually sell anything. Calling them shops is unhelpful in trying to understand them and their harm.

These places are not selling products or services but experience. The architect Klingman, uses casino, the architecture of gambling, as a ‘physical expression of a growing experience economy’.⁶³ Betting shops are no different. They are extensions to the FOBT experience, the ‘zone’. They are designed to make it longer and more immersive. The shop fronts (Figure 19) are ‘brand in architecture’ as Klingmann would see them.⁶⁴ Massive posters with characters and betting odds appeal to players’ imagination and illusion of control – they ‘deal with fantasy and desire on one hand, and utility an

⁵⁹ Association of British Bookmakers, “The Truth about Betting Shops and Gaming Machines.”, ABB submission to DCMS Triennial Review April 2013, April 2013.

⁶⁰ Simon Oaten, Andrew Tong and Thushani Lawson, “The full picture – 2nd edition: Measuring the economic contribution of the British Betting Industry.”, Deloitte, March 2013.

⁶¹ Matthew Engle, “Fix Odds Betting Terminal is Route to Riches for the Bookmaker.”, Financial Times. 4 May 2014.

⁶² Association of British Bookmakers, “The ABB’s Code for Responsible Gambling and Player Protection in Licensed Betting Offices in Great Britain.” September 2013, p.5.

⁶³ Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), p.190.

⁶⁴ Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), p.327.

efficiency on the other.⁶⁵ The Liberalising Gambling Act 2005,⁶⁶⁶⁷ has seen shop opening hours (Figure 20) protracted increasing the zone time and the amount of rent paid to be in it. Similar to a sex shop (Figure 21) the facade is designed to stop people seeing who is inside, minimising player embarrassment.



Figure 19: Kake Pugh, Ladbrokes in Croydon, 3 December 2011.

⁶⁵ Anna Klingmann, *Brandscapes: Architecture in the Experience Economy*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2007), p.193.

⁶⁶ Hannah Kuchler, "Harman regrets Labour gambling reform.", Financial Times, 5 August 12.

⁶⁷ Channel 4 News, "Gambling act was a 'mistake' confesses senior Labour politician.", Channel 4, 6 August 2012.



Figure 20: Harry Trimble, Corals opening times in Soho, 28 August 2014.



Figure 21: Robert Lamb, Sex shop,– Super Mags of Soho, London', 3 October 2010.

Blocking the outside serves a dual purpose. As architect Steen Eiler

Rasmussen said, an architect can control every aspect about a building yet

'daylight alone he cannot control'.⁶⁸ Hence stopping daylight allows for space to become timeless, just like the 'zone'. Betting shops are no longer dingy, uninviting places (Figure 22). They are now highly finished interiors (Figures 23 and 24), with a mix of screens and bright colours, used to denote optimism and excitement. 'We shifted Ladbrokes' shop proposition from transactional to experiential'⁶⁹ – boasts FITCH design director Nathan Watts, commenting on a new Ladbrokes flagship store in London (Figure 25). There is a reason betting shops are being 'designed around the customer experience,'⁷⁰ – FOBTs and therefore 'zone' experience protected the industry during the recent economic downturn, with 'machine revenue generating just under half of all betting shop revenue in the UK market'.⁷¹



Figure 22: Sam Leighton, Dingy traditional bookies, 23 January 2013.

⁶⁸ Steen Eiler Rasmussen, *Experiencing Architecture*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1964), p.186.

⁶⁹ <http://www.retail-focus.co.uk/news/1159-ladbrokes-places-bet-on-new-store-format> (accessed 19 September 2014)

⁷⁰ <http://www.roarbetting.com/p/about-us> (accessed 19 September 2014)

⁷¹ Simon Oaten, Andrew Tong and Thushani Lawson, "The full picture – 2nd edition: Measuring the economic contribution of the British Betting Industry.", Deloitte, March 2013.



Figure 23: Heart Beat, Light and welcoming,- Paddy Power betting shop, 2014



Figure 24: Heart Beat, FOBT cubicles – Paddy Power, 2014.



Figure 25: Fitch, Ladbrokes concept store – the Strand, 23 June 2014.

Ultimately bookmakers have become ‘mini-casinos’⁷² – glossy, welcoming and without a sense of time – designed for long stays immersive play, ‘All the days sporting action.’⁷³ The Association of British Bookmakers even talks of how the staff will ‘walk the shop floor’.⁷⁴ ‘Floor’ being a common word to describe the public space within a casino. FOBT offering the treacherous game of roulette has helped this transformation. Problem gambler Simon points out ‘At one time roulette was banned in the whole of Europe. The only place you could play it was in Monty Carlo. Now you can play in on every high street in Britain.’⁷⁵ These spaces stage the ‘zone’ experience. Marketer Bernd Schmitt

⁷² Greg Wood, “Bookmaker retaliate in battle over tax on FOBT high street casinos.”, The Guardian, 20 April 2014.

⁷³ <http://www.corals.org.uk/corals-betting-shops.html> (accessed 19 September 2014)

⁷⁴ Association of British Bookmakers, “The ABB’s Code for Responsible Gambling and Player Protection in Licensed Betting Offices in Great Britain.” September 2013, p.9.

⁷⁵ John Domokos, Randeep Ramesh, Noah Payne-Frank and Mustafa Khalili, “FOBTs: ‘the crack cocaine of gambling’ – video”, 6 April 2014.

says ‘experiences are usually not self-generated but induced’.⁷⁶ In his groundbreaking book *Learning From Last Vegas*, architect Robert Venturi points out casinos are not just spaces but monuments (Figure 26). My illustration (Figure 27) takes this idea further: that betting shops and FOBTs, are not spaces or products, but moments. The benign gambling machine cannot be just a machine, but what sociologist David Cunningham has called a ‘inhabitable, object of experience’.⁷⁷ Having explored these moment machines, experiential spaces, let’s now contemplate the forces that have allowed them to come into existence.

⁷⁶ Bernd H. Schmitt, *Experiential Marketing: How to Get Customers to Sense, Feel, Think, Act, Relate*, (Massachusetts: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p.61.

⁷⁷ David Cunningham, Nadir Lahiji (editor), *The Political Unconscious of Architecture: Re-opening Jameson’s Narrative*, (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2011), p.48.

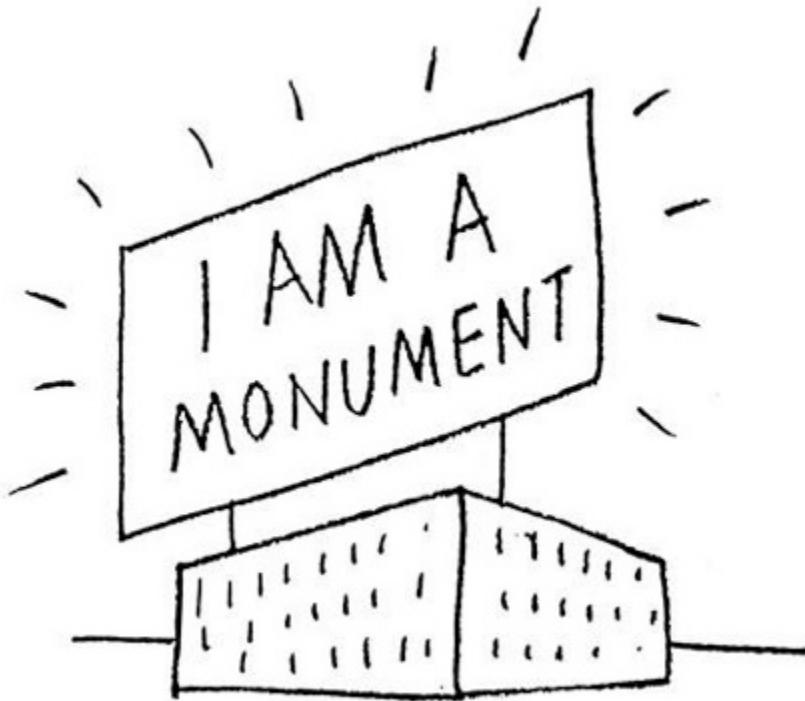


Figure 26: Robert Venturi, I AM A MONUMENT, 23 June 1972.

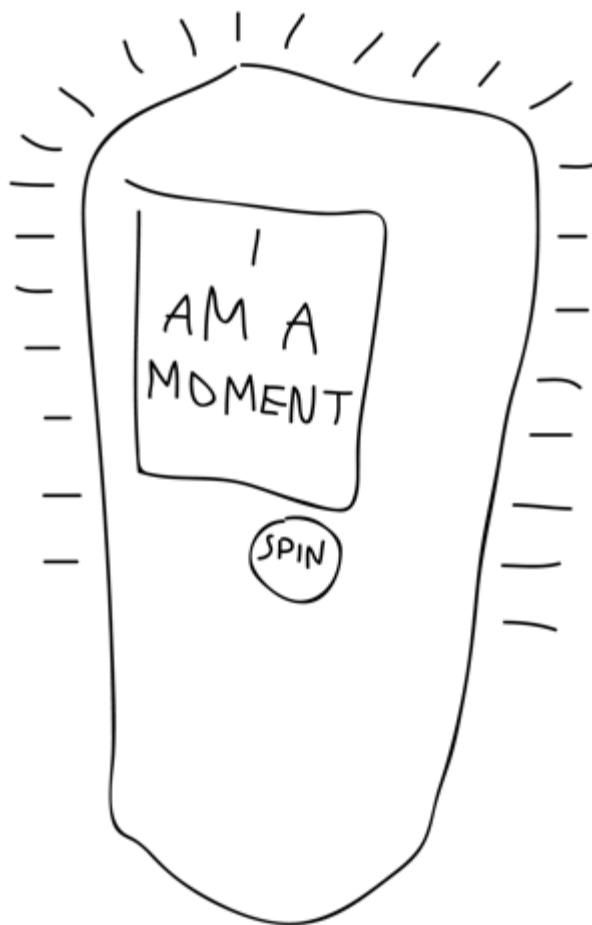


Figure 27: Harry Trimble, FOBT - I AM A MOMENT, 2014.

2.2 Public Relations

Large forces outside the bookmaker experience have allowed the FOBT to flourish. The same forces may prevent the benign gambling machine's creation – consider gambling in relation to public perception, the political process and wealth creation.

Advertising normalises and glamourises gambling. Ladbrokes 2014 ad campaign 'Ladbrokes Life'⁷⁸ (Figure 28) reframes gambling from an activity to a lifestyle: centring on a bunch of friends 'the betting men' (Figure 29), each with relatable traits, the viewer can self-project onto. The campaign shows gambling being the thing around which the group's fun and exciting social life orbits. That betting defines who each of them is – 'THE BELIEVER' (Figure 30), 'GENEROUS JOHN' (Figure 31), 'MR. BRIGHTSIDE' (Figure 32), 'THE PROFESSOR' (Figure 33) and 'GUT TRUSTER' (figure 33). Sociologist Charlotte Fabiansson offers some insight why this might appeal – 'The illusory nature of the carefree lifestyle offered by gambling advertising is perceived by some to be a viable route out of poverty, isolation, unemployment and financial despair.'⁷⁹

⁷⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgCzKQJyWdk> (accessed 22nd September 2014)

⁷⁹ Charlotte Fabiansson, *Pathways to Excessive Gambling: A Societal Perspective on Youth and Adult Gambling Pursuits*, (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), p.71.



Figure 28: Ladbrokes, 'This is the Ladbrokes life', 25 April 2014.



Figure 29: Ladbrokes, 'The Betting Men' – Ladbrokes life campaign, 24 April 2014.



Figure 30: Ladbrokes, 'THE BELIEVER' – Ladbrokes life campaign, 24 April 2014.



Figure 31: Ladbrokes, 'GENEROUS JOHN' – Ladbrokes life campaign, 24 April 2014.



Figure 32: Ladbrokes, 'MR. BRIGHTSIDE' – Ladbrokes life campaign, 24 April 2014.



Figure 33: Ladbrokes, 'THE PROFESSOR' – Ladbrokes life campaign, 24 April 2014.



Figure 34: Ladbrokes, 'GUT TRUSTER' – Ladbrokes life campaign, 24 April 2014.

Advertising prevents the benign gambling machine's creation precisely by creating the impression it already exists. In one video, the Professor character while stood over a roulette table says (Figure 35) ' 'This is not betting, just educated guessing'.⁸⁰ Another advert (Figure 36) reinforces an illusion of control – 'Once is luck, twice is talent'. A 2010 advert (Figure 37) shows a young punter in a casino – causing excitement amongst unusual characters as he places bets on a roulette table. The ball lands on his number, sending the crowd into euphoria. Then he appears at a FOBT in the corner of a room, receiving a congratulatory handshake from a strange cowboy. Casino here is not a metaphor, but a fantasy, a hallucination –

⁸⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=al3FWh6Glfg> (accessed 22 September 2014)

massively glamorising FOBTs – wrongly depicting players as lucky, social, popular individuals. Psychologist Peter Adams reasons these advertising strategies are harmful because they normalise frequent gambling – ‘it can help camouflage the problem gambler among the more numerous moderate gamblers’.⁸¹

⁸¹ Peter J. Adams, *Gambling, Freedom and Democracy*, (New York: Routledge, 2007), p.84.



Figure 35: Ladbrokes, 'This is not betting, just educated guessing' – Ladbrokes life campaign, 24 April 2014.

ONCE IS LUCKY TWICE IS TALENT

THE PROFESSOR

THIS IS THE
Ladbrokes
LIFE



18+ E- NATIONAL GAMBLING HELPLINE 0808 8020 133

*New online and mobile customers only. Not available in shop. Correct promo code must be entered. Singles only. Bets in play do not count. Void bets do not count. Purchase necessary. Free bet expires after 7 days. Stake not returned as winning free bets. Ladbrokes rules apply. For full terms and conditions visit ladbrokes.com/tc/sports-betting/50freebet

Figure 36: Ladbrokes, 'Once is Lucky, Twice is Talent' – Ladbrokes life campaign, 24 April 2014.



Figure 37: Ladbrokes, 'Roulette Martin' Television advert, 17 March 2011.

Author Malcolm Gladwell has talked about 'the desire for proof as an excuse – an excuse to do anything'.⁸² His theory completely sums up the UK's government and gambling industry's attitude towards the harm FOBТ and by extent gambling cause. Back in 2003 journalist Matthew Norman gave FOBTs

⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWaPXzTDEDw> (accessed 22 September 2014)

their now compulsory nickname of ‘crack cocaine of gaming’.⁸³ He had concerns about the then recent introduction of FOBTs – that the decision to allow the notoriously addictive game of roulette on the high street was grossly misinformed. Today bookmakers cluster on high streets, with it now estimated there are 33,284 FOBTs in the UK, generating £1.42bn in profit (and player losses).⁸⁴ ‘One in three callers to the national gambling helpline GamCare name FOBTs as the problem.’⁸⁵

Lobby group Campaign for Fairer Gambling’s January 2013 report evidenced that the density of FOBTs is four times higher in the fifty poorest areas than in the fifty richest ones.⁸⁶ It was only then the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, who is in charge of regulating gambling, got pro-active – commissioning a empirical study into the harmfulness of FOBTs, whose results will be published in late 2014.⁸⁷ Despite this, David Cameron (Figure 34) said during a January 2014 Prime Minister’s Questions, ‘There is no evidence to shift stakes and prize for Fixed Odds Betting Terminals.’⁸⁸

Choosing not to give local councils powers to limit the number of FOBTs.⁸⁹

Speaking to Channel 4’s Michael Crick, Chairman of ABB, Neil Goulden

⁸³ Matthew Norman, “Gaming’s crack cocaine: Nanny Jowell’s decision to unleash roulette on the high street threatens disaster.”, *The Guardian*, 4 August 2003.

⁸⁴ Cath Lewis, Louise Holmes and Alex Scott-Samuel, “Fixed odds betting terminal use and problem gambling across the Liverpool city region.”, Liverpool Public Health Observatory, April 2014, p.16.

⁸⁵ GamCare, “Moving in the Right Direction: Statistics 2011/12.”, GamCare, 2012.

⁸⁶ Raneep Ramesh, “High-stakes gambling machines ‘suck money from poorest communities’.”, *The Guardian*, 4 January 2014.

⁸⁷ Introduction, p.9.

⁸⁸ David Cameron, *Prime Minister’s Questions*, 8 January 2013.

⁸⁹ ibid

(Figure 35) said any suggestion to curbs bookmakers were ‘not justified by any evidence’.⁹⁰ The results of the Responsible Gambling Trust (chaired by Neil Goulden)⁹¹ study⁹² may provide some irrefutable proof of FOBTs’ harm, though what is say it will be acted upon. Stopping the benign gambling machine here is a political and corporate culture that demands proof of harm, but not of safety.



Figure 38: BBC, David Cameron – Prime Ministers questions, 8 January 2014.

⁹⁰ Channel 4 News, “Another throw of the dice on ‘mini-casino’ betting machines”, Channel 4, 8 January 2014.

⁹¹ <http://www.responsiblegamblingtrust.org.uk/Neil-Goulden> (accessed 22 September 2014)

⁹² **Introduction p...**



Figure 39: Channel 4, 'Why do you say we're causing the problem?' – Neil Goulden, Chairman Association of British Bookmakers, 8 January 2014.

Following growing criticism and the perceived threat of increased regulation, the ABB self-regulated itself creating the 'Code For Responsible Gambling and Player Protection',⁹³ claiming it delivered 'Harm Minimisation Strategies'.⁹⁴ These measures could be considered to be trivial, for example one enables FOBT players to limit the amount of money and time they spend on the machine. The onus remains with the gamblers, people with self-control issues. The 2014 Budget saw Chancellor George Osborne raise the tax on FOBTs, from 20% to 25%.⁹⁵ This rocked the share price of bookmakers Ladbrokes and William Hill, dropping 11% and 5% respectively.⁹⁶ It prompted the ABB to ask the public to 'Back Your Local Bookie' and sign a petition

⁹³ <http://backyourlocalbookie.co.uk/campaign/new-abb-code-for-responsible-gambling-and-player-protection-2013/> (accessed 22 September 2014)

⁹⁴ Association of British Bookmakers, "The ABB's Code for Responsible Gambling and Player Protection in Licensed Betting Offices in Great Britain." September 2013.

⁹⁵ Jim Armitage, "Budget 2014: Chancellor under fire over raised duty on fixed-odds betting terminals.", The Independent, 19 March 2014.

⁹⁶ Sean Farrell and Simon Goodley, "Budget measures hit life insurance and gambling shares.", The Guardian, 19 March 2014.

(Figure 36), threatening that the recent government announcements put 2,300 betting shops and 10,000 jobs 'at immediate risk'.⁹⁷



Figure 40: Association of British Bookmakers, 'Over 1 million of you signed our petition calling on the Government to take no further action against the UK betting industry', 29 April 2014.

This is good right? Making FOBTs more expensive, meaning less choose to play them? Fewer harmed. Wrong – the demand on addictive things is inelastic. While the taxman's share of FOBT profits rises, the industry's falls – the number of individuals whose desire to play, unaffected by cost, stays the same. The government not banning FOBTs may not be paternalistic – protecting gamblers from harm, while maintaining their right to gamble, their civil liberties. One might ask why in the first place the government allowed casinos on the high street? 'The Treasury says it expects the tax to raise

⁹⁷ <http://backyourlocalbookie.co.uk/campaign/petition/> (accessed 22 September 2014)

an extra £75m from the industry in 2015/16, rising to £90m in 2018/19.⁹⁸ As Guardian business editor Nils Prately observes ‘a cash-strapped chancellor is surely within his rights to fiddle with the rate of duty’.⁹⁹ Less FOBTs mean less tax-base. Therefore the UK government may not want a benign gambling machine – while potentially protecting the more vulnerable, it may reduce its potential to pay its bills.

2.4 Who's to Blame

What or maybe even who is responsible for problem gambling? The answer to this question may never be agreed upon. Nor do I have time to offer a definitive answer here. All I will quickly do is just show where the finger of blame is being pointed. Whether it is being pointed at the right group and for the right reasons is not important now. The need is to show no one is taking full responsibility. Therefore no one will take responsibility for creating the benign gambling machine. Political theorist Jane Bennett describes the causes of harm being made of ‘assemblages’ of parts.¹⁰⁰ The FOBT’s assemblage usually appears to be made up of three groups: gamblers, gambling industry and government.

⁹⁸ Simon Goodley, “Betting terminals tax hike is bad for bookies but good news for bingo.”, The Guardian, 19 March 2014.

⁹⁹ Nils Pratley, “Ladbrokes: the helpless victim of a reckless chancellor? Hardly...”, The Guardian, 21 March 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Jane Benett, *Vibrant Matter: a Political Ecology of Things*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), p.37.

The gambler blames neither industry or government, but the machines – ‘I have lost my accommodation, job, self-esteem, pride and confidence because of FOBT’s’¹⁰¹ a gambler reflects. Another player refers to the FOBT as ‘The machine that ate my life’. Anti-gambling ‘Stop the FOBTs’¹⁰² name also implies sole responsible and autonomy directly to the machines again personifying the machine¹⁰³. This is a case of ‘Frankenstein Syndrome’, as media theorist Neil Postman, would have seen it – ‘Once the machines is built its built, we discover, always to our surprise – that is has ideas of its own; that it is quite capable of not only changing our habits [...] of changing our habits of mind.’¹⁰⁴

The industry shifts all responsibility on the gambler, the individual – not the government though, that would mean regulation. Gamblers can ‘self-exclude’ from bookmakers.¹⁰⁵ They can set time limits on FOBTs (Figure 37). Following the 5% tax increase on FOBTs, the industry was quick to deflect blame filling their windows with ‘GAMBLE RESPONSIBLY’ posters (Figure 38). Despite ABB bannering ‘Player Protection’ within its code of conduct, all the industry is doing is giving the gambler more opportunities to be responsible.

¹⁰¹ Gambling Commission, “Freedom of Information Response: FOBTs and problem gambling.”, 13 June 2013.

¹⁰² <http://www.stopthefobts.org/> (accessed 23 September 2014)

¹⁰³ [Introduction, p.9.](#)

¹⁰⁴, Neil Postman, *The Disappearance of Childhood*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994 edition) p.24.

¹⁰⁵ <http://www.gambleaware.co.uk/confidential-support-and-advice/self-exclusion> (accessed 23 September 2014)

For the industry the buck stops with gambler to 'stay in control' to quote the poster.

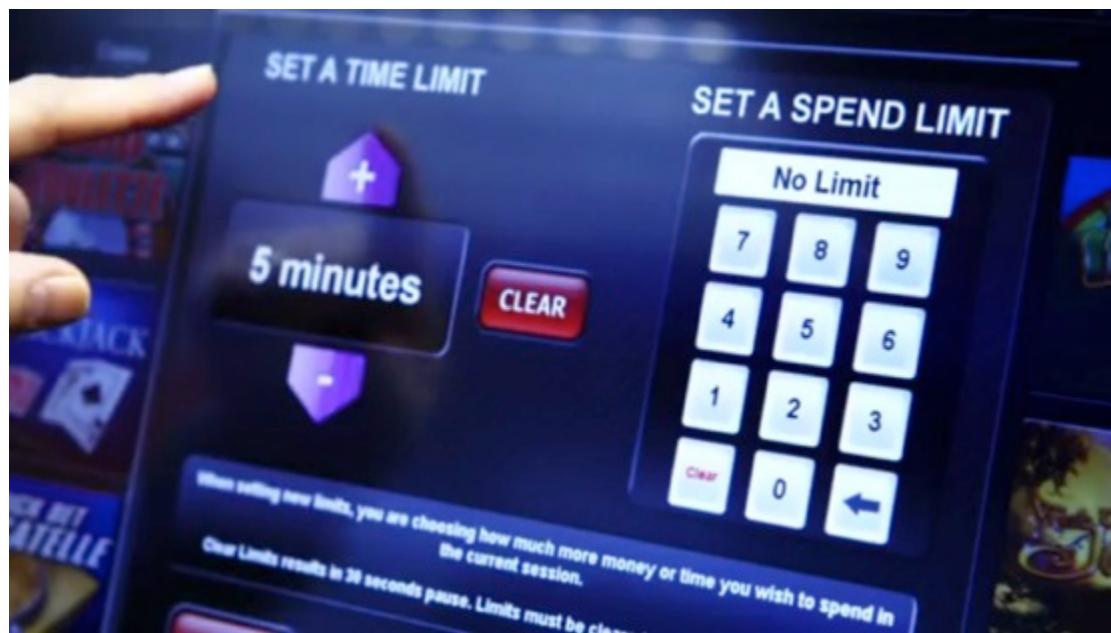


Figure 41: Association British Bookmakers, ABB video demonstrates new FOBT features that gamblers to set their own limits, 3 March 2014.



Figure 42: Harry Trimble, 'SET YOUR OWN MACHINE LIMITS', 13 April 2014.

Reading the Gambling Act 2005, the government officially takes responsibility for ‘protecting children and other vulnerable persons’.¹⁰⁶ Although ‘vulnerable persons is not qualified any further, which is useful for some and not for others. Despite having the regulator Gambling Commission¹⁰⁷ and its DCMS sponsored advisory groups Responsible Gambling Strategy Board¹⁰⁸ and Responsible Gambling Trust,¹⁰⁹ constantly reviewing problem gambling, the government still just deals with it symptomatically supporting treatment services like GamCare¹¹⁰ and the National Problem Gambling Clinic.¹¹¹ Until the last two years, the government has been indifferent to assigning blame – leaving it to the industry to shift it to gamblers. Now there is much postulating. Ed Milliband says FOBTs are ‘spreading like an epidemic’.¹¹² David Cameron believes ‘I think there are problems in the betting and gaming industry.’¹¹³ Responding to the suggestion bookmakers and FOBT fuel problem gambling, MP and Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee member Philip Davies said, ‘This is a ridiculous debate on a ridiculous premise.’¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁶ Parliament of the United Kingdom, Legislation “Gambling Act 2005” – The Licensing Objectives’, 2005.

¹⁰⁷ <http://www.gamblingcommission.gov.uk/> (accessed 23 September 2014)

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.rgsb.org.uk/> (accessed 23 September 2014)

¹⁰⁹ <http://www.responsiblegamblingtrust.org.uk/> (accessed 23 September 2014)

¹¹⁰ <http://www.gamcare.org.uk/> (accessed 23 September 2014)

¹¹¹ <http://www.cnwl.nhs.uk/cnwl-national-problem-gambling-clinic/> (accessed 23 September 2014)

¹¹² Ed Milliband, *Labour would give councils power to ban roulette machines*, 20 December 2013.

¹¹³ David Cameron, *Prime Minister’s Questions*, 8 January 2013.

¹¹⁴ Philip Davies MP, “ Dispelling the myths about gambling.”, The Yorkshire Post, 11 January 2014.

Part Three: Gambling as a Problem

How is a gambling machine harmful and to whom? Actually, what do we mean to call something ‘harmful’? With no answers to these questions, how can I judge, measure anything to be benign – let alone a hypothetical machine?

3.1 The Problem Gambler

Contrary to ABB’s belief that proposing safer gambling is to somehow rob everyone of their ‘right to have a bet’¹¹⁵, it is really about ‘protecting [...] vulnerable persons’¹¹⁶, problem gamblers. Psychiatrist Richard Rosenthal defines ‘problem gambling’ as ‘gambling to a degree that disrupts or damages personal, family or recreational pursuits’.¹¹⁷ This definition is vague and open to deliberate misconstruction. Clinical Psychologist at National Problem Gambling Clinic, Dr Neil Smith, better explains (Figure 43) that unlike social (weekly lottery tick, day at Royal Ascot), recreational (visits betting shops for fun) and professional gamblers (professional poker players), problem gamblers are different – they cannot walk away from losses; they are ‘compulsive’¹¹⁸ gamblers with ‘impaired control’ – an inability to ‘resist the

¹¹⁵ <http://backyourlocalbookie.co.uk/campaign/petition/> (accessed 5 October 2014)

¹¹⁶ Parliament of the United Kingdom, Legislation “Gambling Act 2005” – The Licensing Objectives’, 2005.

¹¹⁷ Lesieur HR, Rosenthal MD, “Pathological gambling: a review of the literature (prepared for the American Psychiatric Association Task Force on DSM-IV Committee on disorders of impulse control not elsewhere classified)” Journal of Gambling Studies.” (1991): 5-39.

¹¹⁸ Author interview with Dr. Neil Smith, Clinical Psychologist – National Problem Gambling Clinic, 25 September 2014.

urge [to gamble] in the context of a genuine desire to cease'¹¹⁹, as psychologist Mark Dickerson describes it. Therefore problem gamblers' decision to bet is not consciously theirs – meaning neither is the one to risk self-harm.

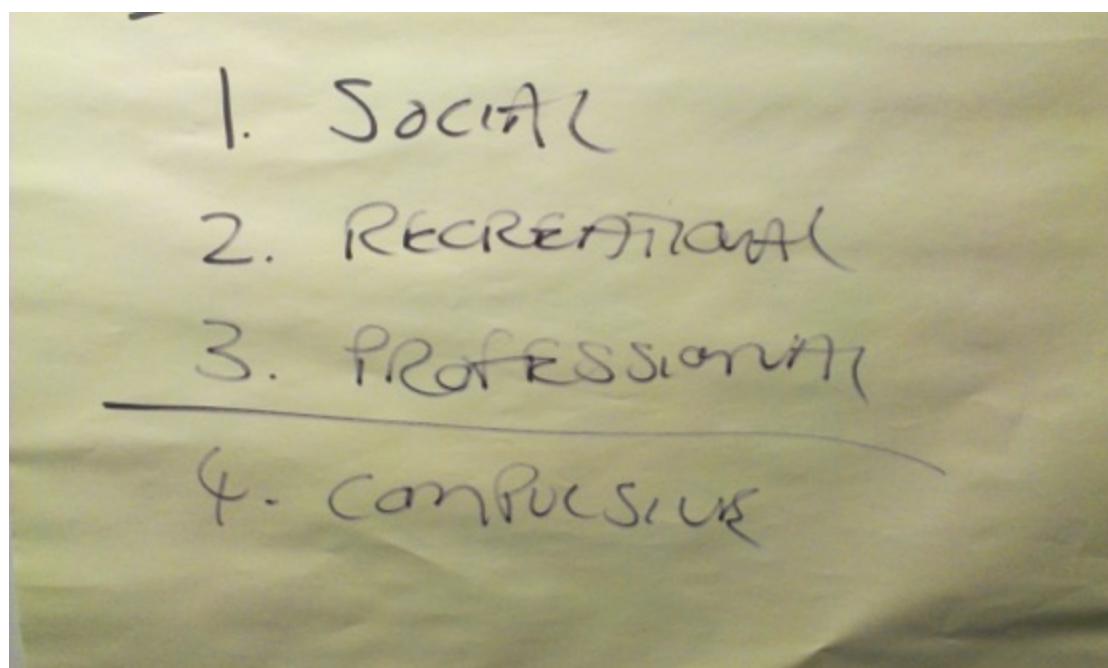


Figure 43: Harry Trimble, Problem gamblers are different – Dr Neil Smith, 25 September 2014.

Also there is what fellow psychologist Michael Walker calls problem gamblers' 'superstitious beliefs', which 'enable people to believe that have some control over fate, so they reduce anxiety and facilitate an optimistic view'.¹²⁰ These beliefs are hard for us to rationalise - the 'illusion of control'¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Mark Dickerson and John O'Connor, *Gambling as an Addictive Behaviour: Impaired Control, Harm Minimisation, Treatment and Prevention*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p.27.

¹²⁰ Masood Zangeneh, Alex Blaszczynski and Nigel E. Turner, *The Pursuit of Winning; Problem Gambling Theory, Research and Treatment*, (New York: Springer, 2008), p.26.

¹²¹ Part One, p.29.

and seeing of non-existent ‘patterns’¹²² found in Part One of this paper. They are ‘means of coping with uncertainty’.¹²³ The vulnerabilities of ‘impaired control’ and ‘superstitious beliefs’ combined with FOBT’s ‘high speed, high stakes’¹²⁴ is potentially devastating in its harm, but in what way?

3.2 What do we Mean by ‘Harmful’?

Gambling is the ‘hidden addiction’ as psychologist Robert Ladouceur puts it.¹²⁵ Unlike heroine, alcohol and crack-cocaine, gambling, the ‘zone’ is not ingested. National Problem Gambling Clinic’s founder Dr Henrietta Bowen-Jones clarifies this point – ‘Pathological gamblers don’t have tract marks on their arms. They’re not walking around with an unsteady gate. They don’t have signs of liver cirrhosis. They’re not shaking when talking to you. It’s very hard to know one.’¹²⁶ The harm gambling can do is financial, rather than physical. Average problem gambler loses are £150,844,¹²⁷ but really it’s the consequences of these loses that harm – 84% of compulsive have committed illegal acts to fund their habit; 51% have lost their partners to gambling; 21% have lost their jobs as a consequence.¹²⁸ A compulsive gambler’s behaviour does not just self-harm. As Dr Bowden-Jones insights ‘it’s about all the

¹²² Part One, p.33.

¹²³ i Masood Zangeneh, Alex Blaszczynski and Nigel E. Turner, *The Pursuit of Winning; Problem Gambling Theory, Research and Treatment*, (New York: Springer, 2008), p.26.

¹²⁴ Randeep Ramesh, “Curb on betting terminal will enforce cut in maximum stake.”, The Observer, 26 April 2014.

¹²⁵ Robert Ladouceur, “Gambling: The Hidden Addiction”, The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, Volume 49 (8) (2004): 501-03.

¹²⁶ Henrietta Bowden-Jones, ‘Treating Addiction Against All the Odds’ – TEDMED Live, Imperial College, 21 April 2013.

¹²⁷ ibid

¹²⁸ ibid

people who are impacted on by the illness'.¹²⁹ A gambling problem can damage relationships and non-gambler lives. The Australian Institute for Gambling Research recognises 'problem gambling' as 'the situation where a person's gambling activity gives rise to harm to the individual player, and/or to his or her family or extend into the community'.¹³⁰ Thus we should consider harm not only beyond money, but the individual. Playing the benign gambling machine therefore must not only be harmless to the player, but also their personal relationships and stakeholders in that person's life.

In that case is my suggestion of a rented 'zone' still theoretically harmless? Consider it is not only money the FOBT consumes, but also 'time spent on gambling which leads to adverse consequences for the gambler'.¹³¹ Electronic Gambling Machines have created 'asocial gambling'¹³² argues anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll. People spending excessive time in the 'zone', regardless of its context, can make them neglect their 'social roles',¹³³ such as being a parent or spouse. Smart phones, long working hours, television, commuting, to name a few, arguably also make us asocial beings, though they are not

¹²⁹ ibid

¹³⁰ Mark Dickinson and John O'Connor, *Gambling as Addictive Behaviour*, (New York: Cambridge University 2006), P.11.

¹³¹ Nerilee Hing, Elaine Nuske, and Louise Holdsworth, "How gaming venue staff use behavioural indicators to assess problem gambling in patrons.", *Journal of Gambling Issues*, Volume 28 (2013): 1-25.

¹³² Natasha Dow Schüll, '*Gambling on the Screen*' – GEL Conference, 2008.

¹³³ Natasha Dow Schull, *Addiction by Design*, (Woodstock UK: Princeton University Press, 2012), p.12.

debated in the House of Commons for being harmful. This is the point where harm, and by extension, risk become far more subjective concepts.

'The dark side of technology cannot be avoided'¹³⁴ claims technology writer Kevin, in his seminal book *What Technology Wants*. His argument is that every invention, despite its benefits will have 'trade offs' with near equal downsides, whether they are environmental degradation, mass scale slavery or human harm. Ultimately 'We find that technology offers a greater benefit, but not by much. In other words, we freely choose to embrace it—and pay the price.'¹³⁵ Sociologist Ulrich Beck states 'risks are bit an invention of modernity [...] hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself'.¹³⁶ Thus in a modern society with inventions and technology, harm may be inevitable. Then perhaps there is acceptable harm?

How to judge acceptable harm? Governments, historian David T. Courtwright contends, have five 'objections to non-medical drug use': direction harm to user, social costs to families and communities, sinful conduct, association with 'deviant groups' and 'anxieties about the collective future'.¹³⁷ Another Historian, Sander Gilman, argues also that we judge harm by association – how crack-cocaine gained a stigma as the 'ritual was increasingly associated

¹³⁴ Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), p.79.

¹³⁵ Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), p.215.

¹³⁶ Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Toward a New Modernity*, (London: Sage, 1992), p.21.

¹³⁷ David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*, (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2002), p.173.

with marginalized ethnic groups and with urban degradation'.¹³⁸ A third example of unacceptable harm and guilt is the government taking action on FOTBs, as they became associated with poor areas.¹³⁹ Anthropologist Axel Klein offers an opposing opinion, that restricting drugs, which the 'zone' is arguable one, is about 'the management of pleasure'.¹⁴⁰

Even if the benign gambling machine existed, it may still be labelled harmful.

Take the E-cigarettes (Figure 40). The invention enables tobacco-less smoking – delivering nicotine, smoking's equivalent of the 'zone', in a vapour.

NHS recommends them for those trying to quit smoking, citing they are 'potentially less harmful than tobacco smoke'. A number of doctors and researcher have called the invention a 'significant health innovation'. Despite it presently appearing to be a safer alternative to smoking, there is strong speak of heavy regulation and bans: the World Health Organisation recommending that e-cigarettes should be regulated just as smoking is now.¹⁴¹ The Welsh government is looking to ban their use in public spaces.¹⁴²

These proposals are not based on evidence, but association with the known risks of smoking – that the dangers are unknown. There is a suspicion that

¹³⁸ Sander L. Gilman, Zhou Xun, *Smoke: a Cultural History of Smoking Around the World*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), p.196.

¹³⁹ Raneep Ramesh, "High-stakes gambling machines 'suck money from poorest communities'.", The Guardian, 4 January 2014.

¹⁴⁰ Axel Klein, *Drugs and the World*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p.183.

¹⁴¹ World Health Organisation, "Electronic Nicotine Delivery Systems" – Conference of the Parties to the WHO Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, 21 July 2014.

http://apps.who.int/gb/fctc/PDF/cop6/FCTC_COP6_10-en.pdf?ua=1 (accessed 5 October 2015).

¹⁴² Press Association, "Electronic cigarettes may face public ban in Wales", The Guardian, 2 April 2014.

they 're-normalise'¹⁴³ regular smoking. Association with FOBTs could mean the benign gambling machine is labelled harmful – implying it should deliver the 'zone' in a medium with new associations and connotations. In e-cigarettes' case the 'desire for proof' is inverted: that a lack of information about harm, means we be cautious. This is perhaps the difference between a public health issue, being regulated by health professionals (Department of Health) and politicians and industry insiders (Department of Culture Media and Sport).

¹⁴³ Press Association, "Electronic cigarettes may face public ban in Wales", The Guardian, 2 April 2014.



Figure 44: Croydon Guardian, Paul Scott was fired for smoking a electronic cigarette at work, 6 November 2013.

Not every activity associated with reduced life expectancy or sudden death is labelled harmful. Car accidents and heroin overdoses in the UK killed roughly

the same number of people in 2011 – 1,901¹⁴⁴ and 1,757¹⁴⁵ respectively. Yet heroin is the only one brandished harmful. Working hard or over working is hardly labelled harmful either, despite the evidenced health risks that ‘workaholics experience chronic illness and early death’.¹⁴⁶ Courtwright argues that we tag something harmful if it makes us lose our ‘industrial habits’.¹⁴⁷ The translation of this is that we see harm in relation to whether something makes us less or more productive. Although driving and over-working can hurt us, they can also make us prosperous. While perceptively crack and heroin only harm, so are confidently labelled so. FOBTs are contentious as they are incapable of delivering both harm and prosperity simultaneously – harming just gamblers, while only benefiting the bookies. Ultimately I see harm is where the downside outweighs the benefits. Question is, are we comfortable when the two are not shared?

¹⁴⁴ Department for Transport, “Reported Road Casualties in Great Britain: Full Results 2011”, 12 June 2012.

¹⁴⁵ St Georges – University of London, “Annual UK drug deaths fall sever per cent, with heroin related death continuing to decline.”, 28 February 2013.

¹⁴⁶ Meredith Ann Senholzi, *The Validation and Generalization of the Work Attitudes and Behaviors Inventory*, (Michigan: ProQuest, 2005), p.17.

¹⁴⁷ David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World*, (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 2002), p.175.

Conclusion: The Benign Gambling Machine

What is preventing the benign gambling machine? Three things: the close relationship between risk and reward; powerful agendas with different aims; our narrow definition of ‘harm’ caused by gambling. The machine would have to be dazzling in its complexity and contradiction: capable of staging a drug-like experience, that is intensively pleasurable but not at all addictive; fashion a sensation of deep concentration and selflessness, which encourages social behaviour; seduce players’ suspicious beliefs, but without exploiting them; be simultaneously mysterious and transparent in how its game mechanics work; sophisticated in its ability to recognise players with impaired control; responsibly and automatically shut down when played impulsively; create a feeling of excitement, removed of all risk – in the face of the ‘the realization that risk-taking is an inextricable part of the pleasure complex’¹⁴⁸ as sociologist Axel Klein debates.

The machine’s chances of achieving its goal of benign gambling really would depend on its ability to survive in outside systems with different aims. It would need a business model that can rival FOBTs in their ability to generate massive profits at minimal risk – in order to lower the gambling industry’s resistance to adopt a safer alternative. Within a financial system where money is dematerialising, the benign gambling machine must restore money’s true

¹⁴⁸ Axel Klein, *Drugs and the World*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), p.186.

value in the eyes of the player. If later proved harmful, the invention should be incapable of maintaining its benign gambling machine label, regardless of clever advertising or any other medium. The machine's creators will need political skills to resolve government and the industry's 'desire for proof' – demonstrate not only the benign gambling machine is for harmless, but prove beyond doubt all others are not. The government will not to make trade-offs between harm and paying the national bill, by virtue of the invention's banality. Its harmlessness must be measureable beyond personal financial loss: benevolent to gamblers' relationships, family, friends and communities.

Maybe I am asking for a bit too much – a design team capable of tackling challenges this complicated. Designing in complex systems, we cannot be sure of all the outcomes. As Kevin Kelly says 'along with the growing capacity of technical options, grows the incalculability of the consequences'.¹⁴⁹ David Cameron takes a less naïve approach too, that in solving the FOBT problem, we have to know we are not creating 'another problem somewhere else'.¹⁵⁰ Environmental scientist Donella Meadows observes that our understanding of systems are always just models – that these 'models fall far short of representing the world fully. That is why we make mistakes and why we are regularly surprised [by systems]'.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ Kevin Kelly, *What Technology Wants*, (New York: Viking Pres, 2011) p.203.

¹⁵⁰ David Cameron, Prime Minister's Questions, 08 January 2013.

¹⁵¹ Donatella H. Meadows, *Thinking in Systems: a Primer*, (Abingdon: Earthscan, 2009), p.87.

This is not a call for more inaction. At the end of the day, I am not merely talking academically about abstract systems, but real people – who need a benign gambling machine. I should ask myself why problem gamblers gamble in the first place? Psychologist Walker states gambling ‘provides them with an effective way of relieving their sense of stress, anxiety, depression, or other negative moods’.¹⁵² Gambling is a symptom for ‘stress, uncertainty and traumatic childhood.¹⁵³ Do we address what we are escaping from or making a better, safer escape? Finally if the benign gambling machine is an improbable destination on the journey of safer betting, it can at least be a direction to aspire to.

¹⁵² Masood Zangeneh, Alex Blaszczynski, Claude Boutin and Nigel E. Turner, *In The Pursuit of Winning; Problem Gambling Theory, Research and Treatment*, (New York, United States: Springer, 2008), P.68.

¹⁵³ Lucy Kellaway, “The Risk Addicts.”, Financial Times, 1 February 2013.
<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/788c1930-6b3a-11e2-9670-00144feab49a.html#axzz3EQagcnlf>
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