

features

Gambled Away

Video Poker and Self-Suspension

Natasha Dow Schüll

Patsy, a green-eyed brunette in her mid-forties, began gambling soon after she moved to Las Vegas from California in the 1980s with her husband, a military officer who had been restationed at Nellis Air Force Base. Video poker machines had been introduced to the local gambling market in the late 1970s, and she discovered them on her trips to the grocery store. “My husband would give me money for food and milk, but I’d get stuck at the machines on the way in, and it would be gone in twenty minutes.

... I would be gone too, I’d just zone into the screen and disappear.”

Ten years later, Patsy’s gambling had progressed to a point where she played video poker before work, at lunchtime, on all her breaks, after work, and all weekend long. “My life revolved around the machines, even the way I ate,” she recalls as we talk outside the Gamblers Anonymous meeting where we had met. Patsy dined with her husband and daughter only when the three met in casinos; she would eat rapidly, then excuse herself to the bathroom so that she could gamble. Most often she gambled alone, then slept in her van in the parking lot. “I would dream of the machines, I would be punching numbers all night.” Eating alone, sleeping alone, Patsy achieved a sort of libidinal autonomy. Her time, her social exchanges, her bodily functions, and even her dreams were oriented around gambling. “When I wasn’t playing,” she tells



Woman playing video poker at a drugstore in Las Vegas.

me, “my whole being was directed to getting back into that zone. *It was a machine life.*”

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Since the mid-1980s in the United States, there has been a dramatic turn away from social forms of gambling, played at tables, to asocial forms of gambling, played at video terminals. Slot machines, formerly relegated to the sidelines of casinos floors, today generate twice as much revenue as all “live games” put together. As gamblers describe it, machine gambling is a solitary, absorptive activity in which they enter a dissociative state—a “zone,” as they call it—in which a sense of time, space, monetary value, social roles, and sometimes even their very sense of existence dissolves. “You can erase it all at the machines—you can even erase yourself,” a middle-aged electronics engineer named Randall tells me. Machine play conjures a cognitive and psychological state virtually free of the events, difficulties, and contingencies that life entails.

When machine gamblers began to present themselves in growing numbers for addiction treatment, clinicians and researchers proposed the term “escape gambling” (as opposed to “action gambling”) to describe their experience of withdrawal. “The consistency of the experience that’s described by my patients,” said Robert Hunter, a Las Vegas psychologist who has carved out a therapeutic niche in the treatment of gambling addiction, “is that of numbness or escape. . . . They don’t talk about excitement—they talk about climbing into the screen and getting lost.” By the mid-1990s in Las Vegas,

the vast majority attending Gamblers Anonymous meetings played machines exclusively, and most preferred the game of video poker. While all contemporary slot machines offer a choice of how many credits to bet on each spin, video poker goes a step further by allowing players to decide which cards—of those they are “dealt” by the machine—they wish to hold or discard in order to make winning hands. As Hunter understands it, the game so completely concentrates the players’ attention on a series of specific choices that anything about their lives that is troubling—physically, emotionally, or socially—gets blotted out.

What can the self-dissolving zone of intensive video poker play tell us about the discontents of the self in contemporary American life? More than a symptom of the extreme tendencies of individual gambling addicts, it offers a window onto more general predicaments and anxieties and insight into the sort of technological encounters that individuals are likely to employ in the management of these predicaments and anxieties. Computers, video games, mobile phones, iPods, and the like have become a means through which people can manage their affective states and create a personal buffer zone against the uncertainties and worries of their world, and video poker is a case in point. The game allows players to suspend key elements of contemporary life—market-based exchange, monetary value, and conventional time—along with the social expectation for self-maximizing, risk-managing behavior that accompanies them. The activity achieves this suspension not by transcending or canceling out these elements and expected modes of conduct,

but by isolating and intensifying them to the point where they turn into something else. By following this process, it becomes possible to track how shared social conditions and normative behavioral ideals contribute to shaping gambling addicts' seemingly aberrant "machine lives," and to discern in those lives a kind of immanent critique of broader discontents.

Suspending Choice

Since the late 1970s, in the context of diminishing governmental regulation and rising expectations for individual self-regulation and responsibility, citizens of capitalist democracies have come to regard the self "as a kind of enterprise, seeking to enhance and capitalize on existence itself through calculated acts and investments"; life choices are expressed and evaluated through a vocabulary of "incomes, allocations, costs, savings, even profits."¹ Contemporary selfhood is a sort of "privatized actuarialism" in which individuals reflexively apply to their own lives the same techniques used to audit and otherwise ensure the financial health of corporations and government bureaucracies.²

As in the spheres of insurance, finance, and global politics, the application of risk-assessment techniques at the scale of individual lives is a means for controlling—and even profiting from—the particular contingencies of post-Fordist, finance-based capitalism. Specifically, the model actuarial self is expected to indemnify itself against the increased risks of unemployment that have accompanied the emergence of "flexible,"

short-term regimes of service-based labor and the eclipse of social-welfare programs, while simultaneously reaping the economic rewards that come with exercising their own flexible and sometimes risky responses to this field of contingency. To fulfill this double expectation, individuals must be extremely autonomous, highly rational, and ever-alert masters of themselves and their decisions; constant contingency management is the task.

Practically speaking, this task is framed in terms of choice making. As the psychologist Barry Schwartz points out, the pressure to sift through an "oppressive abundance" of choice can tyrannize and debilitate, increasing the potential for disappointment, regret, and guilt, and leaving individuals "feeling barely able to manage" their lives.³ It is not merely the abundance of choice that burdens, for citizens of contemporary capitalist societies must, more often than not, make those choices without the knowledge, foresight, or resources that would enable them to be the maximizing, actuarial virtuosi of self-enterprise they are exhorted to be. Confronted with multiple choices and risks, they base their conduct as much on emotion, affect, and reflex as on calculative rationality.

What links can be drawn between the often perplexing circumstances of choice making, the cultural imperative for individual contingency management, and the zone of intensive video poker? While at play, individuals are continually in the position of making consequential choices—choices, that is, between right and wrong decisions, continuing a winning streak or ending a losing streak, ramping up or reducing their



A gambler's hand resting on the console of a video poker terminal, his thumb positioned in the bill acceptor slot and his finger poised to press the "Bet Max" button.

magnitude or speed and investment, and so forth. In this sense, machine gambling multiplies occasions for the kinds of risk taking and choice making that are demanded of subjects in contemporary capitalist societies. At the same time, it takes the edge off the task of contingency management by distilling risks and choices into a digitized, programmatic form. In effect, the activity contracts the scope and stakes of risky choice; although gambling has very real consequences in players' daily lives, within the moment-to-moment process of repeat play inconsequentiality holds sway. In the smooth zone of video poker, choices be-

come a means for tuning out the worldly decisions they would ordinarily concern; every choice, that is, becomes a choice to continue the zone.

Suspending Social Exchange

The tuning out of out worldly choices, contingencies, and consequences in the zone of machine gambling depends on the exclusion of other people. "I don't want to have a human interface" says Julie, a psychology student at the University of Nevada. "I can't stand to have anybody within my zone."

Machine gamblers go to great lengths to ensure their isolation. Some select machines in corners or at the end of a row, while others place coin cups upside-down on adjacent machines to prevent people from sitting beside them. “I resent someone breaking my trance” says Randall, who cashes out and moves to another machine if someone talks to him while he is playing. Sharon has learned to buy a liter of Pepsi and two packs of cigarettes before sitting at the machines, so that cocktail waitresses will not interrupt her. “I put my foot up on one side and that’s the final barrier: *Leave me alone*. I want to hang a DO NOT DISTURB sign on my back.”

Even as the zone ultimately effaces their sense of self, machine gamblers’ rigorous exclusion of relationality appears, at least initially, to be an act of extreme autonomy and even selfishness. In this sense, video poker would seem to fit the script for the maximizing self—a being who is expected to pursue its goals without being hindered by human ties, commitments, and dependencies. “Other people break the flow and I can’t stand it,” says Julie of live-card gaming. “I have to get up and go to a machine, where nobody holds me back, where there’s no interference to stop me, where I can have my free rein—go all the way with no obstacles.” Other people figure as a kind of “interference” that acts as a drag on her propensities.

Yet alongside machine gamblers’ self-interested drive to pursue the zone unhindered by others runs an equally strong current of self-protection and distrust of social relations. This becomes readily apparent in the comparison with the interpersonal en-

gagement of traditional card gambling. “In live games,” Julie observes, “you have to take other people into account, other minds making decisions. Like when you’re competing for a promotion—you’re dealing with other people who decide which one is the best. You can’t get into their minds, you can’t push their buttons, you can’t do anything about it—just sit back and hope and wait. But when you’re on a machine, you don’t compete against other people.” Live card play demands that she “take other people into account” in order not to be displaced or passed over by them, and yet, perversely, provides no clear feedback on which she might base her calculations or hedge her bets. The immersive zone of machine play, by contrast, offers a reprieve from the nebulous and risky calculative matrix of social interaction, shielding her from the monitoring gaze of others and relieving her of the need to monitor them in return.

Lola, a buffet waitress and mother of four, describes this reprieve as a kind of vacation: “If you work with people every day, the last thing you want to do is talk to another person when you’re free. You want to take a vacation from people. With the machine there’s no person that can talk back, no human contact or involvement or communication, just a little square box, a screen.” Machine gamblers like Lola frequently connect their preference for the asocial, robotic procedure of machine play to the hypersociality demanded by their jobs—in real estate, accounting, insurance, sales, and other service fields. In the 1980s, the sociologist Arlie Hochschild proposed the term “emotional labor” to characterize the demands placed on many workers in the postindus-

trial, service economy.⁴ While physical machine labor carries the risk of alienation from one's body, emotional labor carries the risk of becoming estranged from one's feelings and affects as they are processed and managed in the marketplace of social relations. Josie, an insurance agent, experiences this kind of emotional exhaustion: "All day long I have to help people with their finances and their scholarships, help them be responsible. I'm selling insurance, selling investments, I'm taking their money—and I've got to put myself in a position where they will believe what I'm selling is *true*. After work, I have to go to the machines." There, she finds respite from the incessant actuarial practices and interpersonal pressures that her vocation entails. "I was safe and away," Josie elaborates. "Nobody talked to me, nobody asked me any questions, nobody wanted any bigger decision than if I wanted to keep the king or the ace."

Patsy recalls her work as a welfare officer at the State of Nevada's food stamp office: "All day long I'd hear sad stories of no food, unwanted pregnancy, violence. But it all slid right off me because I was so wrapped up in those machines. I was like a robot: *Next. Snap. What's your zip code?* I wasn't human." In the simplified, mechanical exchange with gambling machines, she removes herself from the complicated and often insurmountable needs and worries of others, to a point where she herself becomes robotlike, impervious to human distress and her inability to assuage it. "The machines were like heaven," Patsy remembers, "because I didn't have to talk to them, I just had to feed them money." The digitized process of "feeding" and response is a

form of exchange emptied of the inscrutabilities of social relations. "The interaction was clean cut, the parameters clearly defined," Sharon notes. "I decided which cards to keep, which to discard, case closed. All I had to do was pick YES or NO." Video poker gamblers enter a kind of safety zone in which choices do not implicate them in webs of uncertainty and consequence; choices are made without reference to others and seemingly impact no one.

Suspending Money Value

At the same time that machine gambling alters the nature of exchange to a point where it becomes disconnected from relationships, it alters the nature of money's role in the social world. Money typically serves to facilitate exchanges with others and establish a social identity, yet in the asocial, insulated encounter with the gambling machine money becomes a currency of disconnection from others and even oneself. "You put a twenty dollar bill in the machine and it's no longer a twenty dollar bill, it has no value in that sense," Julie tells me. "It's like a token, it excludes money value completely." "Money has no value, no significance," says another, "it's just this thing—just get me in the zone, that's all." "In the zone state," echoes a gambler named Katrina, "there is no real money—*there are only credits to be maintained*."

Attesting to the conversion of money value into zone value, Sharon admits that she would rather "play off" a jackpot than cash it out, as this would mean halting her

play to wait for the machine to drop her winnings, or, in the event that its hopper is low, for attendants to come pay her off. "It's strange," says Lola, "but winning can disappoint me, especially if I win right away." Winning too much, too soon, or too often can interrupt the tempo of play and disturb the harmonious regularity of the zone. Julie explains: "If it's a moderate day—win, lose, win, lose—you keep the same pace. But if you win big, it can prevent you from staying in the zone." If in the everyday economy time is spent to earn money, within the economy of the zone money is spent to buy time. "You're not playing for money," says Julie, "you're playing for credit—credit so you can sit there longer, which is the goal. It's not about winning, *it's about continuing to play.*"

**It's not about winning,
*it's about continuing to play.***

Paradoxically, in order for money to lose its value as a means of acquisition, that value must be at stake in the gambling exchange. "The transaction must involve money," the gambling scholar Charles Livingstone elaborates, "because money is the central signification of our age, the materialization of social relations and thus the bridge to everyone and everything that is to be had in modernity."⁵ It is possible for a sense of monetary value to become suspended in machine gambling not because money is absent, but because the activity mobilizes it in such a way that it no longer works as it typically does. Money becomes the bridge *away from* everyone and everything, leading to a zone beyond value, with no social or economic significance.

When credits get too low, money's everyday value moves to the fore and begins to matter once again. "I get really tense if I only have twenty credits left," says Lola, "the tension, the anxiousness, starts building in me; all I really want at that point is enough credits to just keep playing." "When you start losing," Julie tells us, "the pace picks up—you're running out of player credit, you're running out of money. . . ." As the worldly value-charge of money intrudes

upon the zone, it introduces tension where tensionlessness is sought and relationality where dissociation is sought. "In the back of my head I know it's going to end, I know the transition is going to come—no longer the world according to the zone, but the real world. The things I escaped from start crowding back into my brain." In the moment of its total loss, money returns to the scene as a tangible limit and a medium of dependency. "Money disappears in the zone," writes Livingstone, "yet in the moment when the money's gone, so too is 'the zone.'"⁶ The value of money reasserts itself precisely because money in its conventional, real-world state remains the underlying means of access to the zone.

This is not to say that money's real-world value remains unaffected by zone value. "Gambling changed my relationship to money," remembers Randall. "I'd conserve gas so I'd have the money to gamble, and instead of going to the grocery store regularly, I'd wait to go to Wal-Mart and do it all at one time—that way I wouldn't have to waste the gas to go more than once. I econ-

omized.” Caught between the zone and the ordinary world, gamblers “economize” in a register of value that has no clear reference point.

“In a society such as ours,” asks the cultural historian Jackson Lears in his book on gambling in America, “where responsibility and choice are exalted, where capital accumulation is a duty and cash a sacred cow, what could be more subversive than the readiness to reduce money to mere counters in a game?”⁷ Because gamblers play *with* money rather than *for* it, he concludes that they pose a challenge to the maximizing ethos of American culture. Yet as their “machine lives” show us, despite their seeming renunciation of money they continue to act, however perversely, *within* the mainstream monetary value system. This becomes readily apparent when one considers gamblers’ extensive know-how and use of everyday finance and banking practices.

“I always had income coming in,” Patsy tells me, “every week it was something—a \$600 paycheck, \$500 child support, my husband’s retirement checks. We always had like three credit cards so if I had a bad spell I’d just put it on the cards.” The resources of a conventional financial lifestyle—mortgages, credit cards, bank loans, and alimony payments—support Patsy’s compulsive gambling, and occasionally vice versa: “One time I had maxed out the three cards, but then I hit a jackpot and paid them all off.” This sort of fiscal triage does not exactly subvert the logic of the actuarial self; if anything, it intensifies or “maxes out” that logic. Although it may seem contrary to calculative rationality, it shares something with the quotidian shuf-

fling of debt among credit sources that has become typical among Americans.

Although gambling addicts’ treatment of money neither neatly renounces nor neatly rehearses the workings of the everyday value system, it *alters* this system in a way that brings its discontents and contradictions to the fore. As Josie told us earlier, by day she advises others on how they might best insure against future losses: “I have to help people be responsible. . . . I’ve got to put myself in a position where they will believe what I’m selling is true.” One gets the sense that she herself does not quite believe in what she is selling; it is as if her awareness that the levels of risk assigned to lives and investments by the insurance industry are always more arbitrary than stated leads her to take greater personal financial risks. “After work, I have to go to the machines.” Her gambling both employs and rejects the actuarial logic of insurance and the monetary value that undergirds it. “In my life before gambling,” she tells me, “money was almost like a God, I had to have it. But with the gambling, money had no value, no significance, it was just this thing—just get me in the zone, that’s all. . . . You lose value, until there’s no value at all. Except the zone—the zone is your God.”

Suspending Clock Time

The element of time is another resource of calculative selfhood that gambling addicts manage to convert into a means of escape through their machine play—again, by distilling its real-world value to a point where it assumes another value altogether. While gambling addicts may remain for seventeen



Top: Video poker alcove at Lucky's Supermarket in southwest Las Vegas. Bottom: AMPM gas station in north Las Vegas.

hours or even whole weekends at machines, the “clock time” (as they call it) by which those long stretches are measured “stops mattering,” “sits still,” is “gone” or “lost.” Like money, time in the zone becomes a kind of credit whose value shifts in line with the rhythms of machine play; gamblers speak of *spending* time, *salvaging* it, *squandering* it. Randall, noting a phenomenological kinship between his video poker play and his race car driving, comments that both activities make him feel he is “bending” time: “I go into a different time frame, like in slow motion . . . it’s a whole other time zone.”

Just as gamblers must maintain sufficient monetary credit to keep the zone state going, they must maintain sufficient temporal credit; too little time, and the real world will impinge upon the zone—work shifts to begin, doctors appointments to be kept, children to be picked up from school. When time begins to “run out,” players thus seek to extract more and more plays from it. As Julie describes in the following passage, she extends zone time by constantly resetting the endpoint of her play:

When the time comes to leave and the things I escaped from start crowding back into my brain, I find myself rationalizing, *Well, I don’t really have to go today . . .* and I ask an attendant to hold my machine while I run to the payphone to call and buy myself more time, and then back to continue, and now there’s three more hours. And when those three hours are up, I think, *I’ll have to save money for the phone calls I’ll have to make to cancel all the appointments I am going to miss. . . .*

I’m thinking of how to arrange things so that I can stay there, *how to economize.*

In the intervals of tension that threaten the continuation of her play, Julie calculates in two registers of time at once—clock time and zone time. How can she parlay the former into the latter? Or, as she asks above, *how to economize?* At the edges of the zone, Julie must remain mindful of the coins she needs to “save” to cover the cost of phone calls that might free up clock time and thus buy her more zone time. (Again, we see that the zone never entirely loses its economic market metric, for real-world money is what buys the clock time that buys zone time.)

When she can buy herself no more time and real-world demands press upon her, Julie resorts to speed, as she does when her play credits are running dangerously low. “When I absolutely have to be somewhere, then I have to play as much as I can possibly play before leaving. I start chasing, I play faster and faster—*Oh God, I only have fifteen more minutes, ten more minutes. . . .*” In the zone, she experiences time as event driven rather than clock driven, elastic rather than rigid.

If real-world temporal tendencies express themselves in the zone and in gamblers’ addiction to it, it is also the case that the tech-

When I absolutely have to be somewhere, . . . I play faster and faster—*Oh God, I only have fifteen more minutes, ten more minutes.*

nologically accelerated temporality of the machine zone enters into and saturates gamblers' experience of real-world time. "Time in general, not just when I'm playing," Sharon notes, "becomes very distorted. I feel like I can manipulate it very easily, salvage much more than I can from a small unit of it: go grocery shopping on the way to the casino, and while I'm there make a doctor's appointment on the cellular phone, and then on the way home get the shoelaces I need. . . . Everything I do is relative to gambling time."

"I'd be later and later and later to work," Patsy recalls. "At break time, I'd ask my supervisor, *Do you mind if I go to the bank?*—and I'd already be out the door. My sense of time was totally out the door. I was just *wound*. I'd win a Royal [Flush] and I'd be ticked off because I'd have to wait for them to come pay me off. The other workers would look at the clock when I came back and I would think, *What are you looking at the clock for? Mind your own business.*" At every chance, Patsy attempts to escape clock time, such that she becomes almost like a clock herself: she is "wound"; she is "ticked off" as time ticks by during her wait for a jackpot payoff; when she returns to work, resentful co-workers look pointedly at the clock. "When I wasn't playing," she told us earlier, "my whole being was directed to getting back into that zone. *It was a machine life.*"

Machine Life

"I was like the walking dead," Patsy remembers. "I went through all the motions, but I

wasn't really living, because I was always channeled, super-tunnel vision, to get back to that machine." "Awake, my whole day was structured around getting out of the house to go gamble," echoes Sharon. "At night, I would dream about the machine—I'd see it, the cards flipping, the whole screen. I'd be playing, making decisions about which cards to keep and which to throw away." In Sharon's account, the game interface structures her waking life and dream life with its unending flow of minute "decisions."

As we have seen, a complicated relationship exists between the technologically mediated mini-decisions that compose video poker and the ever-proliferating choices, decisions, and risks that actuarial selves face in free-market society. The activity narrows the bandwidth of choice, shrinking it down to a limited universe of rules, a formula. Although choices are multiplied, they are digitally reformatted as a self-dissolving flow of repetitious action that unfolds in the absence of "choosing" as such. In this sense, it is not the case that gambling addicts are beyond choice but that choice itself, as formatted by machines, becomes the medium of their compulsion. "I was addicted to making decisions in an unmessy way," Sharon remarks, "to engaging in something where *I knew what the outcome would be.*"

"Most people define gambling as pure chance, where you don't know the outcome," she goes on. "But I do know: either I'm going to *win*, or I'm going to *lose*. . . . So it isn't really a gamble at all—in fact, it's one of the few places I'm certain about anything." Counterintuitively, what gamblers seek through their engagements with gam-

bling machines is a zone of reliability, safety, and affective calm that removes them from the volatility they experience in their social, financial, and personal lives. Although the activity deals in chance, it holds worldly contingencies in a kind of abeyance by immediately resolving bets with the quick press of a button, admitting gamblers into an otherwise elusive zone of certainty. In this zone, aspects of life central to contemporary capitalism and the service economy—competitive exchange between individuals, money as the chief symbol or form of this exchange, and the market-based temporal framework within which it is conducted and by which its value is measured—are significantly altered. Video poker distills these aspects of life into their elementary forms (namely, risk-based interaction, actuarial economic thinking, and compressed, elastic time) and applies them to a course of action formatted in such a way that they cease to serve as tools for self-enterprise and instead serve as the means to continue play.

Yet the suspension of the self and its actuarial imperative is never entirely complete. This incompleteness is reflected in the ambivalence that gamblers express toward the “choices” they face while gambling, describing them as at once emancipatory and entrapping, annihilatory and capacitating, reassuring and demonic. Lola, the buffet waitress, speaks of “resting in the machine,” then later in her narrative describes video poker’s relentless stream of card choosing as commanding—the activity “hooks,” “holds,” and “captures” her attention. “*You have no choice but to concentrate on the*

screen,” remarks Julie, “you simply cannot think about anything except which cards *you are going to choose* to keep and which *you are going to choose* to discard.” Even as gambling addicts in the zone strive for release from the procession of choices they face in their daily lives, they remain caught in the predicaments of the enterprising self.

Notes

This article is drawn from Natasha Dow Schüll’s book, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton University Press, 2012). Used with permission.

All photos are by the author.

1. Rose 1999, 164.
2. O’Malley 1996, 198.
3. Schwartz 2005.
4. Hochschild 1983.
5. Livingstone 2005, 533.
6. Livingstone 2005, 533.
7. Lears 2003.

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Natasha Dow Schüll is a cultural anthropologist and associate professor in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her book, *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (Princeton University Press, 2012), explores the feedback between the technological configuration of gambling activities and the experience of addiction.