

Finding fear and loathing in Las Vegas

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Abstract:

Casinos serve as the proverbial devil on the shoulder to strengthen the convictions – and addictions – of those who have succumbed to the controlling mechanisms of casino culture, and the tangential addictions that often accompany gambling disorders. Acknowledging that millions of people gamble on a daily basis without negative outcomes, the present project seeks to draw attention to the fact that little scholarly attention is given to ‘leisure industries’, such as corporatized gambling, that can create parasitic and exploitative relationships with the public that they purport to serve. By exploring the unique relations and interactions between the staff and clientele of a specific casino in Las Vegas, the purpose of the current study is to shed light on the nuanced and ambiguous relations between casino and gambler. While it appears we can re-create the baser versions of ourselves, we sought to illustrate the cost that comes for some gamblers.

Keywords: Leisure | problem gambling | agency | ethnography | gonzo

Article:

Prelude

I¹ visited my friend, the general manager at Loose Slots Depot² (Depot) in Las Vegas, a while back, and was hanging out in his office for a few hours when he was approached with the problem of the day; a ‘high roller’ had established a pattern of defecating in his pants at the poker table over the course of several months. Apparently it was driving away other players, and understandably so. By now it had become too much for the management to tolerate any longer. So why would they not just kick him out? Well, he lost on average about \$80,000 (USD) a year, a pretty significant and reliable revenue stream for a small, local, off-strip casino (which typically cater to non-tourist gamblers). That day management was trying to figure out how to politely get him to clean up and change clothes before he gambled further. I assumed this was an isolated incident – I was wrong. Starting that day in 2016, and for roughly the next eighteen months, I was forwarded police reports and anecdotes from management and staff about what went on at the casino.³

We decided that these stories were masking a more serious social problem, that of the parasitic⁴ relationship between casinos and their ‘guests’, and therefore felt the need to find out more. Dick Hebdige (2003) said that industries like theme parks and casinos are ‘raising cattle’, ‘not for the slaughter, but to graze the verdant malls and media-ways ... forever ... to graze and blink and wear the brand’ (164). What we found at the Depot takes place in myriad commercial recreation installations across the globe; the distillation of hyper-programmed, situationally sterilized environments whose purpose is to capture and retain customers solely to feed the bottom line. This is the ‘experience industry’ at its worst. Casinos, especially in Las Vegas, serve as the proverbial devil on the shoulder to strengthen the convictions – and addictions – of those who have succumbed to the controlling mechanisms of casino culture, and the tangential addictions that often accompany gambling disorders. ‘The market produces willing consumers who construct their social identities through acts of consumption’ (Crabbe 2006, 165), and it appears that the Las Vegas casino industry is a more-than-willing participant in this culture of excess.

Introduction

With the exception of Rojek’s (1999a) initial exploration, it is only in roughly the last decade that leisure scholars have explored deviant behaviour in any depth, largely because negative outcomes are often not viewed as ‘leisure’ (Sullivan 2006). As Blackshaw (2017) asserts, ‘leisure is not constrained by having to look a certain way or be of a certain style’ (16), thus reminding us that what *is* leisure, and how we study and try to understand it is in need of an overhaul. This is particularly true as scholars try to navigate the presence and prescriptive culture of commercial industries on the existential development and meaning that some search for, or find, in their leisure. As will be displayed, especially in the context of casinos, commodification of the leisure activity leads to the imposition of ‘false needs’ (Franklin-Reible 2006) that have the potential to negatively impact the gambler’s life and wellbeing through their addictive properties (Holleran Steiker 2008).

Deciphering how an activity like problem gambling fits in the canon of leisure requires us to explore different approaches to understanding the ambiguous concept of leisure in all its fluidity and enigmatic properties (Blackshaw 2017). Acknowledging that millions of people gamble on a daily basis without negative outcomes – the vast majority, the present project seeks to draw attention to the fact that little scholarly attention is given to ‘leisure industries’, such as corporatized gambling, that can create parasitic and exploitative relationships with the public that they purport to serve. By exploring the unique relations and interactions between the staff and clientele of the Loose Slots Depot, the purpose of the current study is to shed light on the nuanced and ambiguous relations between casino and gambler. There were a number of questions we were interested in learning more about: Just what is it about gambling that causes many people to spend away their life’s earnings? How do Depot guests come to perceive their interactions with casino staff as friendly and reciprocal? And, why do the gamblers interviewed become loyal to the Depot, often considering it as an extension of their identity, referring to Depot as their second ‘home’?

19 December 2017

Las Vegas is quite possibly my least favorite place on Earth. But there I found myself (again), in that artificial city of decadence, where supposedly what happens there, stays there – only that would not be the case this time. As I stepped into the terminal at McCarran International to be picked up by a stranger, I readied myself for 48 hours spent in a place I believe to be the worst society has to offer. My friend, the general manager of the Depot, put together my itinerary for two full days and said I would know the guy who was to pick me up when I saw him. So it came as no surprise when a man dressed head-to-toe in an American flag ski suit greeted me with a sign that read: GONZO. My guide, Slim, said to me, ‘I hear you’re looking for the seedy underbelly of Vegas. That’s my specialty and I’m going to take you there’.

Literature review

Deviance in perception, behaviour, and industry

Stebbins (1996) said that deviant behaviour takes on two forms: tolerable and intolerable. Tolerable deviance is of minimal threat and generally accepted by individuals and communities, whereas intolerable deviance is ‘behavior in violation of powerful criminal and non-criminal moral norms’ (6). However, some scholars have challenged this interpretation of deviance. Williams (2009) suggested that ‘the core of deviant behavior has less to do with morality and more to do with something that is unusual’ or unconventional in common social norms (211). Williams and Walker (2006) extend this line of thinking by indicating that many forms of leisure, such as vandalism or drug use, that are perceived as deviant should really be viewed as extensions of artistry, creativity, or expressive emotions, thus suggesting that like leisure, what is deviant needs to be understood from multiple vantage points.

Leisure behaviours that have been socially stigmatized as deviant, such as binge drinking (Crabbe 2006), sex tourism and solicitation of prostitution (Chernish 1999; Oppermann 1999), drug use (Harmon 2018; Spracklen 2017), and sadomasochism (Franklin-Reible 2006), help us develop a better understanding about the dual roles of individual agency and social structure in seeking subjectively defined leisure (Crabbe 2006). Since supposed deviant leisure behaviour takes place in the social realm, it follows that deviance can be learned and is socialized (Franklin-Reible 2006). When industries, such as commercialized gambling, see the potential for capitalizing on societally ‘abnormal’ interests, fetishes, or activities, the market responds in both the recruitment and production of ‘willing consumers who construct their social identities through acts of consumption’ (Crabbe 2006, 165). The commercialization of deviance calls into question where deviance takes place – in the consumer, the society, the industry, or the intersection of all three?

Rojek (1999a) articulated three forms of what he called abnormal (or deviant) leisure: invasive, mephitic and wild, with invasive leisure being of most relevance to this particular study. Invasive leisure, for Rojek, comes to be ‘when individuals are unable to build enriching or viable relationships’ and ‘retreat from everyday life’ (28). For some, society and the existent relationships and activities one is involved with fall short of one’s perception of leisure, thus leading them to seek alternatives that may be perceived as deviant. Franklin-Reible (2006) concurred, stating that society and social life have the potential to be inherently alienating due to

prevailing stigmas and social norms. Crabbe (2006) sees deviant leisure behaviours and activities as a response to the status quo, where the consumer can escape on a ‘moral holiday’ to indulge in the immoral and societally questionable acts that beckon them (161). Foucault’s (1967/1984) concept of heterotopias, and more specifically, heterotopias of deviation, is especially fitting in this context. Casinos are societally sanctioned sites for escape, yet they carry the potential to be viewed as spaces of deviance for gamblers if they trespass beyond the limits of social norms or invite other excesses that sometimes accompany the seedier side of gambling (excess alcohol consumption, drug use, prostitution, etc.). Problem gamblers can challenge the moral code in their personal pursuit of fulfilment. And it should be noted, a person cannot escape on ‘holiday’ forever – reality and its repercussions soon come calling (Blackshaw 2017).

The issue at hand, then, is how society enables people to ‘be themselves’ through leisure. Rojek (1999a) suggested that people are after opportunities to ‘get in touch with those areas of the self that are repressed otherwise’ (33). Franklin-Reible (2006) agreed, theorizing that deviant leisure behaviour is an escape from consumerist culture and the alienation it brings. But what happens when a powerful leisure industry usurps aspects of this deviance and paradoxically commodifies it solely for profit at the expense of the leisure seeker’s health and wellbeing? An obvious contradiction is how gambling can be perceived as deviant if it is clearly not an escape from consumerist culture. In this light we must hold in the balance the power of industry to obfuscate the perception of what is deviant, and thus potentially unhealthy for society, in order to serve its economic interests; a paradox of paramount concern.

Casinos and their patrons

The literature on gambling, gamblers, and the gaming industry largely focuses on two topics: the trajectory of problem gambling addiction (*cf.* Grant and Bowling 2015; Nower and Blaszczynski 2010), and industry expansion and its impact on tourism (*cf.* Chhabra 2009; Perdue, Long, and Kang 1995). Several recent studies on the gaming industry have focused on ‘late-life’ gamblers, those who are retired and have accrued a nest egg from which to spend and have fewer restrictions on their time, thus making them prime clients for recruitment into the world of gambling (Chhabra 2009; Hagen, Nixon, and Solowoniuk 2006). While the majority of gamblers do not succumb to addiction (North American Foundation for Gambling Addiction Help 2018), there is concern among scholars that all gamblers are susceptible to developing an addiction (Grant and Bowling 2015). Because this study focuses on the parasitic aspects of the casino-guest relationship, and thus the benefits (i.e. revenue) casinos draw from their clients, we turn our attention to that of problem gambling.

Problem gambling

According to the North American Foundation for Gambling Addiction Help (2018), 2.6% of gamblers in the United States, or roughly 10 million people, have a gambling addiction (in Australia it is estimated that roughly 1% of gamblers would qualify as addicted). Studies on problem gambling behaviour have sought to establish a clear definition of addiction for decades. Orford, Morison, and Somers (1996) said that addiction should be defined in terms of the ‘strengths of the person’s attachment’ to gambling, which includes their frequency of participation, a feeling of dependency on gambling, as well as the significant social and legal

harm that comes by way of the addiction to gambling (48). More recently, and a complement to that definition, scholars have distinguished gambling addicts from those who gamble *responsibly*⁵: exercising control and making informed decisions on the use of money and time in order to keep gambling in balance with other important life activities and responsibilities, such as work and family (Hing, Russell, and Hronis 2017). Operating with these two poles to guide our assessment of the participants of this study, as will be displayed, those involved appeared to skew heavily to the former definition, that of problem gamblers. This may be symptomatic of ‘locals’ casinos (typically off-strip), in that patrons who reside closer to casinos and thus spend more time at them are more prone to gambling in excess and developing an addiction (Welte et al. 2016).

As gamblers become more embedded in their identities and rationalize their time and money spent in casinos, the losses stack up and they are forced to ‘chase’ those losses in hopes of winning back what they have gambled away (Holleran Steiker 2008; Orford, Morison, and Somers 1996). These pathological gamblers no longer behave as if the game is determined by chance, but as if some manner of their strategies or superstitions may sway the results (Ladouceur 2004). Those with a gambling disorder will continue to further reinforce their perceptions of gambling as a purely fun leisure activity, and rationalize against their compounding losses and any stigmatization they may encounter from family, friends, or co-workers (Gavriel-Fried, Peled, and Ajzenstadt 2015). As these beliefs and habits accrue over years of gambling, the players become fully immersed in a dependent, if not parasitic, relationship with the casino (Jackson et al. 2013).

Slot machines have reinvigorated the gambling experience and are perhaps the most lucrative and popular gaming installation in casinos, as they are designed using principles from the video gaming industry to suck players in and keep them there (Ahonen, Tammi, and Hirschovits-Gerz 2017). As a result, Holleran Steiker (2008) has called video gaming ‘the crack cocaine of gambling’ (273). As gamblers become more and more immersed in their games, they lose sense of time, which further enables their addiction (Trivedi and Teichert 2017). Additionally, casino staff, especially hosts and servers, are trained to be extra-social and sympathetic to players’ plights. These often misleading relationships may stoke a gambler’s self-perception as an important member of the casino’s ‘community’ or ‘family’ through the supposed social support, which in reality is simply enacted to retain the customer and get them to spend more money (Loroz 2004).

Methods

On the ride from the airport to the Depot I was trying to get a handle on Slim and his story. He was a likable guy but clearly had some issues that he had been struggling with for quite some time. He mentioned that he was originally from Florida and that he visited Las Vegas for years before finally deciding to move there permanently. I asked him what caused him to do so, to which he replied, ‘Everything I ever wanted is here. The lights don’t turn off and the bars don’t close. And even if I lose it all there’s always another shot at redemption tomorrow’. As I was soon to find out, for Slim, there would be a lot of losing before he found his glory.

Creative influence

We developed a creative analytic practice (Parry and Johnson 2007) we call *gonzo auto/ethnography* (Harmon and Dunlap 2018) to explore the decadent behaviours and dependent relationships of gamblers to one off-strip, locals' casino in Las Vegas. In doing so, we drew inspiration from Hunter S. Thompson's (1971, 1979) method of storytelling to showcase how gamblers find fulfilment in their chosen leisure experience. The epistemology of *gonzo auto/ethnography* requires abandoning the framework of contemporary forms of understanding to tell a story outside the lines of traditional and positivistic portrayals of data (Lincoln and Guba 2005). Hunter S. Thompson's writing style was said to be comprised of 'facts [that] were fuel for his imagination' and that gonzo journalism insisted on the writer's involvement with the phenomenon to insert moments of satire to tell a more captivating story (Caron 1985).

'Finding fear and loathing in Las Vegas' is rooted in absurdity and imagination, as well as the personal stories of the gamblers and staff at one casino in Las Vegas. In Sefcovic's (1995) conceptual piece which sought to outline what gonzo ethnography *might* look like, he said that gonzo journalism was sensationalistic, 'and rabidly opinionated,' and relied on 'extreme' forms of ethnographic observation and storytelling (20).

Parry and Johnson (2007) claimed that personal meanings are the most representative depiction of the lived experience, suggesting that to understand a subject that can be perceived as a social problem, like addictive gambling habits, it needs to be understood through multiple lenses, including that of the person who receives supposed benefit from participation. However, in traditional scholarship those meanings can often get buried in the 'preferred' structure and dissemination of data, thus warranting the need for creative attempts at showcasing the attraction of the lived experience for the consumer, even if it is cloaked in darkness (Rojek 1999b).

According to Thompson (1979), gonzo journalism is 'a style of "reporting" based on William Faulkner's idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism – and the best journalists have always known this' (106). Thompson went on to say that:

Is not to say that Fiction is necessarily 'more true' than Journalism or vice versa – but that both 'fiction' and 'journalism' are artificial categories; and that both forms, at their best, are only two different means to the same end ... True gonzo reporting needs the talents of a master journalist, the eye of an artist/photographer and the heavy balls of an actor. The writer must be a participant in the scene, while he's writing it ... Only a goddamn lunatic would write a thing like this and then claim it was true. (107–108)

We hold no claim to objectivity in this effort. Our intent was to blend social critique and satire to tell one story of the seedy underbelly of casino life in Las Vegas based on a brief ethnographic study. Blackshaw (2017) indicated that every study is a 'reflection of its author' (59), and sometimes narrative is a 'viable alternative' for examining the world – something we embraced wholeheartedly.

Study participants and semi-structured interviews

There were six participants in semi-structured interviews who were all long-time players at the Loose Slots Depot. Four males, three white and one Pacific Islander, between the ages of 55 and 71, as well as two females, one white (47) and one black (62). The purpose of the interviews was to develop a better understanding about the role of gambling in the participants' lives, as well as any negative side-effects of gambling. Interviews lasted about an hour and were recorded with permission of the participants. Interviews took place during December of 2017 in a secluded area of the food court at the casino. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect their identity.

Additionally, there were five informal interviews with casino staff: the general manager, three hostesses, and one cocktail waitress. The purpose of the interviews with casino staff was to garner extra depth and colour to support and/or challenge statements made by the gambling participants, as well as to learn additional information about clientele in general from the perspective of staff. These occurred in the host's office, an area under 24/7 video and audio surveillance (as is common to casinos). All four staff interviewees are white or Hispanic females, ranging in age from the low-40s to mid-50s, each one having worked at the Depot for a minimum of five years. The casino's general manager is Hispanic, in his early 40s, and has worked at the Depot for more than three years. In addition, one extended interaction with another player over the course of one afternoon was relied on to develop the narrative, a middle-aged white male and frequent customer at the Depot in composite fashion (Berbary 2011).

Conversation netting

We devised a novel method of data collection we call 'conversation netting' where, with permission from the participants, the recorder is turned on for hours at a time in an environment where a specific phenomenon is likely to be discussed (Harmon and Dunlap 2018). In this instance, conversation netting took place for roughly five hours over two days in the casino host's office. It was common for guests (and staff) to come into the office throughout the day, every day. There were approximately 20 casino patrons that came in during the five hours of conversation netting. These informal interactions were devoid of any scripted component, and any discussions that took place merely added colour to the broader scene of what transpired during the study. In addition to the signage on the door to the host's office that reads, 'This room is under 24/7 audio and video surveillance', each guest and employee that entered was advised that the recordings were being used for research purposes. This yielded a significant amount of unusable data due to irrelevant and trivial conversations, but also allowed for the possibility that information related to the study's focus on the dependent relationship between gamblers and the casino might arise. These data were used to add background and colour to the formal and informal interviews. The theme sub-headings were terminology used by some of the participants.

Data representation

The sum of data was ultimately represented in composite form to emphasize the multiple and frequent bizarre and debaucherous experiences of those gamblers involved in this story. The 'what is it like' and the 'unsaid' in this phenomenon were essential to telling the parts of the story of off-strip casino life we do not typically hear (Wertz et al. 2011). Berbary (2011) said that the 'construction of characters by composite' can lead to a more significant impact of the purpose and potential of the research (190). In tandem with this, we invoked aspects of the 'tall

tale', which is a reciprocal engagement between the author(s) and the reader(s) to find meaning and apply it to their lives (Brown 1987; Caron 1985; Wonham 1993). With all respect to Thompson (1971), we attempted to emulate his playful style of writing to highlight the importance of the personality of the finished piece for drawing in the reader. We relied on sarcasm, humour, factual liberties, and at times, profane interpretations, to draw the reader in by giving a truly, and openly, subjective account of just what happened in the seedy underbelly of Las Vegas over the course of a few days.

Finding fear and loathing in Las Vegas

Slim dropped me off at my friend's casino while he went to park his dilapidated, and possibly stolen, 1976 Cadillac Eldorado illegally in front of a fire hydrant. He said he would meet me inside as he had a few things to 'take care of' and would track me down later. I surveyed the landscape and stared at the players, all seemingly fascinated by the blinking lights and miniscule payouts 'earned' every few minutes, keeping them hooked to the umbilical cord of the slot machines. I would not say that anyone here looked 'happy', but some did look mildly amused, gleeful to piss away their day watching the bright lights blink. Most of these people looked down on their luck, depressed. Is this where it starts or where it ends?

I turned to the front desk to get my room for the next three nights and the service clerk said to me, *'I'm sorry, Mr. Harmon, but your room isn't ready yet. Would you like to have a seat at the bar until it is?'* I must have had a scornful look on my face because her otherwise sunny, yet plastic, grin melted before my eyes.

'How can my room not be ready? Check-in is at 3 p.m., it's almost 9 p.m. now,' I said.

The clerk, Daphne, said, 'Well the previous guest didn't leave it in such great shape so we're trying to get it just exactly perfect for you!'

'Just give me another room then, I don't care,' I responded.

'Oh no, sir, we were told to make sure you had everything you need during your stay, simply the best we have to offer of anything. You're getting the presidential suite'.

Feeling another perplexed look come over my face, I slowly turned to look at the casino. There was nothing in this dump that was 'presidential'. Built in the 1970s as a bowling alley, it still sort of looks like one. Some of the décor is unmistakably bowling alley couture, but it also reminded me of what a 1970s funeral home probably looked like. The appearance, to me, was that this is where people come to die. As I would soon find out, this was not an inaccurate assumption. The place smelled of two distinct and disgusting odours which are far worse than you could ever imagine when they mix: a dirty ashtray and a grandmotherly perfume. I could only imagine what the 'presidential suite' looked and smelled like.

I turned back to Daphne and said, 'Well, can you at least tell me what the previous guest did to the room? I'd like to know what I'm getting myself into'.

Her sunny disposition faded away again, and she appeared to ready herself in defiance of my request, then accepted defeat and said, ‘Well, there was a little problem with some parasites, sir’.

‘Go on’.

She continued, ‘Well, and I shouldn’t be saying this, but I think one of the prostitutes may have given the previous guest crabs, bed bugs, or lice. I don’t know which, but they’re fumigating the room now. It should be all ready for you soon!’ The ease with which ‘parasites’ rolled off her tongue, like it was nothing, was startling. The stupid grin that made its way back to her face was infuriating.

‘Give me another room. Now’. There was simply no way I was staying in a room crawling with critters and recently poisoned with industrial bug spray.

‘I’ll see what I can do,’ she said, smiling. About that time Slim walked over to me and asked what was taking so long, furiously puffing away at his cigarette. His cancer stick was almost entirely ash, and it appeared as if he was trying to get every last bit of lung disease he could from it the way he pulled at it like an oxygen mask. After I told him the story he invited me to stay in his room. I politely declined.

Marie, one of the casino’s longest-serving hostesses, walked up to me and told me she was sorry for the situation and got my housing situation sorted out. She had a sweet and easygoing way about herself, and she was able to quickly diffuse my anger and frustration, something that is essential to her line of work. She got my new room squared away and accompanied me to the elevator. It appeared as if she would come with me to the room to make sure everything was alright. I said, ‘Thank you, but I think I’ve got it from here’, trying not to be rude because I was indeed grateful for how quickly she handled my situation. She looked over her shoulder, and then back to me and said, ‘Watch out hanging around with Slim. He’s a loose cannon and he’s got a nose for trouble’. I thanked her for the advice. From first glance I knew Slim was ‘trouble’, and that was what I came here to find. I was just having a hard time settling in at first, that was all. The elevator door as about to close shut and at that moment I saw two hands pry the door open, tripping the elevator’s alarm. Slim greeted me with a wide grin, eyes pixelated, sweat pouring down his face. He was still wearing his American flag ski suit, along with a helmet that had a Mohawk on it – something he would don for the remainder of my time in Las Vegas. He then said to me, ‘Alright, let’s go. I’ve got some things I need to do’.

The belly of the beast

We stepped out of the elevator to find Slim’s buddy, Diego, standing before us with three drinks in his hands. Diego flashed me a wild smile and I moved to take one of the beverages, assuming it was for me. Diego then turned to me and said, ‘So why are you here? Slim said it is some kind of research or something?’

I responded, ‘Yes, that’s right’, and started to tell him what I was doing.

He shut my explanation down and said, 'I've got some fucked up stories. Is that what you wanna hear?'

'Yea, pretty much'.

Diego chirped, 'Oh, I've got plenty of those!'

I asked Diego what he thought about the gaming industry of Las Vegas, as he had mentioned that he moved there from Hawaii specifically to spend his retirement gambling. I was curious if he was comfortable with the insurmountable odds that come with casino gambling and the hard-earned money he would no doubt lose to the Depot. He took off his Vietnam veteran hat and said to me, 'Vegas is not here because people win. People get caught up in it. It becomes an addiction. That's why they have those hotlines. It's like a drug'. I asked him if he was addicted, and he responded, 'Well, I'm not going to leave when I'm winning. Once I start losing then it's time to go'. That did not really answer my question, and I started to probe again, but he cut me off, going on a lengthy diatribe about his tours in Vietnam, relating it to gambling addiction.

Diego then said, 'Gambling can give you PTSD. You don't get PTSD at the end of a tour, you get it at the start when you see the first fucked up thing. So when you lose your rent money, it spirals out of control. Your gambling related PTSD spirals out of control and affects every aspect of your life. You can get deeper and deeper in a hole'. I surmised that he was unwilling to tell me he was addicted to gambling, though he offered to introduce me to others who were.

I headed to the bar to get a drink and sat down on a stool, exhausted. It was close to midnight and I was ready to call it a night. Just as I was about to order, I heard a ruckus on the casino floor over my shoulder. I turned around to see Slim, and he was yelling at a woman and a security guard, and it looked pretty heated. I walked over so I could hear the debacle, and from what I could tell, the woman was a hooker, and she supposedly took Slim's money and did not 'complete the transaction'. Marie, the casino hostess, snuck up on my side and said, 'That's the problem with "non-contract" labor; you can't really hold people accountable to the deal, huh?' I let out a smirk, really starting to appreciate Marie's role as casino hostess. People like her are essential to the functioning of these places. They put out fires and keep the big players right where the casino wants them: onsite and spending money. She invited me to spend some time with her the next day and I eagerly accepted. It would be nice to have a break from Slim – and I had not even been in Las Vegas three hours.

I got one of the worst night's sleep I have ever had, in part due to the bed feeling like a prison cot, but more likely because of a late night ruckus outside my door that I soon learned involved my chaperone, Slim:

Depot incident report: 20 December 2017

On Wednesday December 20, 2017 at approximately 4:36am, Assistant Security Supervisor (A/S) Billie Buckner was standing at the front desk talking with front desk clerk Nicky Johnson when she received a call from the guest staying in room 4624 in regards to him being robbed at gun point by an unidentified black female assailant (BFA) he was soliciting services from. A/S

Buckner had surveillance run a review to see if the BFA could be located and he notified security dispatch. The surveillance team was able to locate the BFA however she had already left the casino with an unidentified white male accomplice and departed the property. A/S Buckner and Security Floor Officer (S/O) Jay Wright made contact with the guest in room 4624 later identified as Jack 'Slim' Dalton. Dalton was asked what took place, and he stated that he went to the restroom and when he walked out the BFA was standing there with a gun to his face and told him to give her all his money. Dalton stated that he gave the BFA all the money that he had with him which was approximately \$2,000. Dalton was advised that he could fill out a statement from the casino and that if he wanted to pursue the issue he would need to contact Metro police. Dalton stated to A/S Buckner that he was concerned about getting Metro involved because of the situation with him buying services from a prostitute and that there may have been drugs involved. A/S Buckner advised Dalton that he would not get in trouble with Metro for that then Dalton continued to say that he also had warrants for his arrest and was afraid that if he called Metro he would go to jail. A/S Buckner told Dalton he was not sure of what would happen but that if he wanted the situation to be addressed Metro would need to be called. Dalton decided that he did not want to call Metro nor did he want to fill out a statement. He stated to A/S Buckner and S/O Wright that he had his own street justice and that he would take care of the situation. Nothing further from security at this time.

20 December 2017

I was not able to go back to bed, so when I finally got up, I decided to walk down to the casino host's office. I would spend a lot of time there over the next two days. My first interview was not until 11 am, so I was just going there to get some background about the players in general. I sat down with Marie who is a fountain of knowledge about the players at Depot. She had been there 17 years and knew everyone and everything. Players came in every few minutes looking for comps (complimentary items given to players by casinos to reward 'loyalty') or begging for one thing or another. It is her job to appease them as much as she can.

Marie went on to say that, 'the casino staff are surrogates for family for many of the players here either because they do not have any family still living, or because the players have either been excommunicated, or in many instances they abandoned their families on their own'. I could tell I was in for some depressing stories about the casino culture here in Las Vegas. Marie then began to tell me about Nola, my first interviewee. She started off saying what a sweetheart she was, and you could tell she was sort of providing some padding about Nola because of a hard blow that would follow. Then she stopped herself and said, '*Let's just watch the video instead*'.

In the span of less than ten minutes, you see Nola getting aggravated with a slot machine. She slammed her drink and leaned her chair against the machine with her player card still in it, and then ran to the exit. About five minutes later she ran back in and someone was sitting at 'her' machine and Nola's player's card was now on the floor. Nola yelled and screamed, and then grabbed the offender by her hair and threw her across the room. A large security guard hustled up to her and grabbed Nola, but she swung around cracking him in the jaw with her elbow. Several other guards came and wrestled her down, and the police hauled her away. Nola was banned from the premises for two months, and she was just let back onsite a few days before my arrival.

Keep 'em feeding

Just before 11 am I walked over to a slot machine called 'Lightning' where I found Nola and her wife, Kitty, playing. We made our introductions and I sat down at the machine next to her and plunked in a \$20 bill. Nola told me she had lived in Las Vegas all her life and indicated that she was finally starting to think about leaving the 'fastlane' of Sin City. I was curious as to why and she responded, 'I've been to hell and back with this gambling and partying lifestyle. I've hit rock bottom with the gambling. I've gambled too much. It's caused issues in my family. It's caused a lot of problems for me'. Having just watched a video of her starting a fight and getting arrested, not to mention incurring a two-month ban from the casino, I knew exactly what some of those problems were. Nola indicated most of her problems stemmed from drinking: 'I've gotten really intoxicated and gambled away our life savings multiple times. When that happens I get home and I'll be so upset that I just act like a huge pain in the ass, raising hell, starting trouble. I can be really awful when I drink too much'.

I asked her if she was taking any steps to curb her drinking to which she smiled and responded, 'Recently I quit drinking. I talked to my therapist and she said I could have three drinks a day and that's where I'm at. Really, I don't have a drinking problem, I have a stopping problem. If I can stop at three I'll be level-headed and have enough sense to leave'. About that time my \$20 expired – I never won on any pull – and another interviewee, Earline, approached us. Earline said to me, '*Looks like you got that seat warmed up for me. That machine's ready to hit! Mind if I take over?*' Nola and Kitty said their goodbyes and strolled over to the bar and grabbed a seat. I saw Nola whip out a stack of \$100 bills and place them next to the video poker game and the bartender sat down a tumbler glass and poured it full of vodka; there must have been three or four shots in it. Stopped drinking indeed.

Earline was a sixty-something firecracker of a woman, one of the friendliest people I have ever met. I scooted down one machine and stuck another \$20 in and we started talking about her background and upbringing, and she mentioned that she started gambling at age five. She was jovial in every response, and almost everything she said was followed by a loud and infectious laugh. I asked her if gambling had ever affected her life negatively, and she responded, 'You know it! I done broke the bank so many times I lost count. I remember one time me and my friend was here and she was like, "How much money you got?" I said, "\$37." She said, "No, I mean in your bank account?" I said, "\$37!" Ha, ha, ha! I've lost it all so many times it ain't funny!' At that point I could tell the conversation would be a good glimpse into the parasitic relationship between casino and 'guest' I expected to find.

We started to talk about the Depot and why she came here so frequently. She stuck her player card in the machine and went to the 'player's statistics' screen where it showed she played 321 of the last 365 days, losing roughly \$17,000 in 2017 alone. My eyes widened at the sight of that, and then she starting talking about how the casino staff were her 'friends'. I asked her how she could consider these people her friends if they were taking her money, to which she retorted, 'Child, I'm giving it to them! Ain't nobody robbing me! I'm keepin' the doors open on this place!' I chuckled and acknowledged that she was indeed here of her own free will, but was still baffled. We all have our vices, but why would you wall yourself off in a sunlight-free, time-free,

fresh air-free environment just to piss away your life savings? Just how could this be the best use of your time? As we neared the end of our chat I asked Earline if gambling was important to her life, and she answered, 'Hell yeah it is. I love it. This is what I was raised to do. This is what I was born to do. If I lose all my money, don't matter. I'll just make some more!' The Depot, and the casino industry in general, are counting on it. Agents of the casino, such as hostesses like Marie, are really there to facilitate this exploitation of the consumer, even if the gambler is perceived to be a consenting party.

Another horrible night of sleep as I was woken up by another one of Slim's late night security issues:

Depot incident report: 21 December 2017

On Thursday December 21, 2017 at approximately 5:30am, Security Officer (S/O) Larry Banks was conducting a hotel security safety check in the south tower and found room #4624s door ajar. Security dispatch attempted to make contact with the guest in the room, registered to Jack 'Slim' Dalton, via telephone with negative contact. S/O Banks knocked, entered to do a welfare check, found the room unoccupied and in disarray with trash, condoms unopened and used, all over. In plain view were narcotics related items including a small pile of white powdery/grainy looking substance, a small plastic bag with green leafy substance appearing to be marijuana and a small rock like crystal. Other items were seen that are commonly associated with narcotics use such as metal spoons and baking soda. The front desk was notified of the circumstances regarding his room along with the Director of Security. No contact was made with Dalton regarding the situation. No further information at this time.

21 December 2017

Slim had not been spotted onsite since then, and at that point I was kind of hoping to not have to run into him again. My flight out was the following morning at 6 am, so I was hoping to wrap up my time with the interviewees and casino hostesses and then turn in early. I walked down to the casino and into the host's office where I would spend a good chunk of the day chatting with Marie and listening to stories about players.

Shortly thereafter a player who was down thousands of dollars, already having maxed out his credit cards and drained his debit card, rushed into the host's office to ask for an advance on his line of credit; he was lent an additional \$1,000 due to his status as a 'VIP' player. Marie informed me it was quite common for them to extend money to reliable players assuming they had applied for credit in-house. The interest rates were zero percent – for one month; another way for the casino to mislead their guests into thinking it was not a bad deal and also encouraged them to keep gambling – and losing. Debts have to be paid back in 30 days, otherwise failure to pay becomes a felony. In many instances Depot will work with certain clients to make a payment plan. Often further credit is built into these agreements to ensure the parasitic relationship endures.

As I got ready to wrap up my trip and put an end to my time in Las Vegas there was a call over the security speakers in the host's office: 'We have a white male in custody, suspected of

solicitation of prostitution, substance use and possible sales, and resisting arrest. Metro has been dispatched and will remove him from the premises'. Marie, without missing a beat, said, 'That's your buddy Slim. No doubt about it'. About then we both stepped out of the host's office onto the casino floor to see Slim being escorted off the premises. Marie quipped, 'I told you he was trouble'.



Dependency

A handwritten letter was sent to Depot management shortly after the arrest of Jack 'Slim' Dalton. It has been transcribed and edited only for format, not for content, except to include pseudonyms:

Temp. Address:

CCDC
Inmate # Z4359370-6x.25a
330 S. Casino Center
LV, NV 89101

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Wednesday 1.03.18

Greeting and Salutations from Clark County Detention Center. The complete antithesis from [Loose Slots Depot]! As you can see I'm just a number not a human being. No doubt you have not seen or heard from me since that ill fated early evening of December 21st. Quite the scene, no violence, no cursing, no crying, pretty dull event vis a vis life at the raceway. You'll have to tell me about it sometime. I hope you find this letter with a faint smile, but probably not. So I have some questions for you. I would surely appreciate a response at your earliest convenience. Please use the return address on this envelope or on this sadly personalized stationary.

The following summarizes my questions for you.

1. PROPERTY: I had the one large blue suitcase and one red suitcase. Clothing, the used underwear, t-shirts, pants, sox, 2 pairs brand new shoes, never worn. Electric Norelco

(shaver). Razor (was in bathroom), the charger vase. I need box it came in because I have to return it. All crap in the 3 drawers & 2 nightstand drawers. Nothing thrown out. I have important receipts & other things only I need. There were 2 tubes of Cortisone Cream, Full. Toothbrush, toothpaste. I hope nothing was arbitrarily deemed trash. I had about \$20k under the mattress. I hope that was found.

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Property continued

Of highest importance are bank statements. Some are still in envelopes, others are loose, downloads from the bank. I need these sent to me ASAP. If you could please send them to this address like in large envelopes that would be perfect. These are sensitive documents, I trust you won't or security won't peruse through them. All statements are from Bank of America or Schwab. Please just send what was recovered from security.

- 2. Status as loyal patron to [Loose Slots Depot]. as we both know I won a little and lost a shitload, pardon the expression. Yes, the girl I was with did partake in chemicals of some kind. Metro did not charge me with possession. I was arrested on a failure to appear bench warrant, unrelated to chemicals or the such. It involved a misunderstanding between my Brazilian roommate & myself I was charged with misdemeanor neglect.*

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2) Continued Status.

Devon [security guard] read me the riot act regarding having been warned about having chemicals in my room before & therefore since said should I step onto property without prior authorization from the director of security, I will be detained & subsequently arrested for trespassing.

Devon memorized this lengthy statement & delivered / uttered so quickly, I only got the trespassing part. Wondered why the Dir of Sec was 20 yards down the hall. Now, I adopted [Depot] as my home for nearly 6 months. God & you guys know how much I lost & minimal wins. I built solid friendships I believe with you and the rest of the hostesses & well as everyone from the floor people, including cleaning crew, housekeeping, front desk team all shifts, Bar Keeps & of course the cocktail waitresses, especially took care of them when biz was slow & I did OK. I would feel like an orphan should I be 86'D from [Depot]. I love [Depot], the employees, the [Last Chance Café].

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So I feel the respect and friendship is mutual. So the questions become:

- 1. After retrieving my property, am I still welcomed at [Depot]?*
- 2. If so, am I still entitled to complete the extended stay originally granted to me by you. I promise not to have anyone who uses garbage like that in my room should this last disaster be forgiven but not forgotten.*
- 3. Can you/and Molly (your boss) go to the Director of Security and 'Go to bat for me'. Losing a loyal major loser would damage our bottom line. P/L wise [indecipherable]*

word] – I'd agree to any [indecipherable word] your team & his lay down for reacceptance to play, drink & eat at [Depot].

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4. *Finally, my hope is we can move forward in the aftermath of this highly embarrassing event. Metro forgot where they parked the car & so handcuffed and flanked by the 2 Metro cops, 4 security types we strutted through the casino from one south to north & back south to Crenshaw, where parked car. Everyone was watching. I died a thousand times in six minutes. No fun. Again, I love [Depot] & all that made my stay there comfortable, safe, relaxing & convenient to get food, drink & gamble, my 3 vices, aside from loving the opposite sex but you already knew that. Please try to meet my requests, especially the cash & bank statements & establish a resolution of whether I can return or not.*

*Love Ever loving Friend
[Jack 'Slim' Dalton]*

*Say Hi to all if you get a chance.
My release date is 2.19.18*

Discussion

Suicides are quite common at the Depot: they sometimes have one a month, and these typically occur in the guest rooms. Many are related to gambling losses, often accumulated over frenetic bursts of 24-72 hours where the player is financially crippled. One participant, Donnie, discussed how in the past he had nearly blown through his nest egg and would lie awake at night with a .38 revolver clutched in his grip for weeks. While a very serious subject, he managed to joke about it, speaking quite candidly. Though he lived nearby, he said, 'I would've done it here. You know, if they take all my money, least they can do is carry me out, too!'

Each of the gambling participants of this study, whether they participated formally or informally, had lengthy tenures as gamblers. While a few could afford to lose the money they gambled away – though most could not – there were still aspects of their addiction that were detrimental to their overall wellbeing. As several of the participants pointed out, '*Las Vegas does not exist because it loses money*'. Because of this, it is important to explore what it is about gambling that is so appealing, as well as what aspects of the casino exist to reinforce that appeal (addiction).

That a whole industry associated with 'leisure' provides immediate access to potential financial ruin, catalysts for domestic abuse, and easily accessible gateways to further indulgence in criminalized activities like prostitution and drug use suggests that what we think about deviance needs to be expanded (Ahonen, Tammi, and Hirschovits-Gerz 2017; Meyer and Stadler 1999). What needs to be examined more closely is the role of industry (casinos in this instance) and their deviance in exploiting its guests.

The negative aspects and side-effects of modern casino gaming can increase players' impulsivity, and this has been connected to a predilection for involvement in illicit activities (Ahonen, Tammi, and Hirschovits-Gerz 2017), something that we emphasized in the preceding narrative. First referred to as 'purple' leisure (Curtis 1988) – now commonly referred to as deviant leisure, those who participate in activities that are either illegal or viewed as immoral often find themselves fighting against the norms of society, which can then reinforce their roles and leave them on the outskirts of society (Gavriel-Fried, Peled, and Ajzenstadt 2015).

Casinos have been said to 'suspend reality' for players (Loroz 2004), thus causing guests to feel as if they can win. This suspension of reality was evident in this study, both in terms of the narrative and in the participants' expectations from their preferred leisure activity of gambling. Diego may have put it best when he said,

The machine is there to keep you there. If no one ever won, then no one would ever play. The machine needs to give back eventually. You've got to feed the starving otherwise they die and then the system dies. Las Vegas is smart: some people win, and some people have to win big. That way others think it'll happen to them.

The occasional random win will keep players feeding at the teat of the casino (Ladouceur 2004). As demonstrated in the excerpts on Nola and Earline, and the observations of guests who visited the host's office for comps and new lines of credit, players are duped into believing they can win back their losses, hedging this irrational belief on their own past isolated 'successes' or those of others (Orford, Morison, and Somers 1996).

Each of the participants was able to rationalize their addictions and presented these behaviours as normal and part of their identity and lifestyle (Loroz 2004). The prioritizing of gambling as of primary importance negatively affected relationships with close friends and families. Because of this, these problem gamblers looked for lifestyle reinforcement from other gamblers (Jackson et al. 2013), as well as from casino management, hosts, and dealers (Franklin-Reible 2006; Loroz 2004). Many reported losing close relationships over gambling, and some, like Nola, were trying to navigate how to prevent the dissolution of their marriages through their addictions.

Even though several participants had lost all of their money multiple times in their lives, they were able to build up a 'cognitive defense' against those financial crises because of the allure of future winnings (Orford, Morison, and Somers 1996), thus trapping them in an inescapable loop where the casino dictates much of their lifestyle as the place that speaks to their every want and need (Friedman 2000). This was best captured through the stylized narrative of 'Slim' and his hedonistic recklessness that literally cost him everything he owned – including his freedom. Yet even after Depot parted ways with him, allowing him to be prosecuted, he still wanted to return to the place he identified as his 'home' and the place where he found his 'friends'. This causes us to wonder if casino staff are active, if not conscious, co-conspirators in the fleecing of their clients. For an industry only exists and thrives if people set and enforce the terms of their service, which in this case is to extract as much money from their customer base as possible. That a whole industry that falls under the large umbrella of leisure services is not only complicit in this exploitation of people, but promotes it, suggests further exploration is needed of the relationships between casinos and their guests, and the environments they carefully construct to keep the

consumer sedated and spending money (Friedman 2000; Trivedi and Teichert 2017). In the casino industry cash is king and the consumers are merely its suppliers.

Conclusion

I sat with Billy in the sportsbook [area of the casino where sports wagers are made] for about 90 minutes after our interview slowly sipping tall vodkas as he knocked back multiple glasses of what he called 'poor man's privilege'. I asked what was in it, and he responded, 'The worst well-whiskey they've got' and chuckled. As I listened to him talk about how he ended up in Las Vegas – he had made 41 trips before he finally relocated from Michigan in the late 1990s – he motioned over two women whom I had originally not paid much attention to. As they approached the table my throat clenched; it dawned on me what their line of work probably was. I felt the sweat pour out of my armpits; was he hiring us hookers?

This study caused us to consider the role of agency and personal responsibility vis-a-vis the design of casino experiences in the world of commercial gambling: are gamblers merely pawns of the casino industry who have succumbed to addiction, or are they willing participants – recreational masochists, perhaps? Rojek (1999a) intimated that the moral constraints of society cause individuals to look for a release often found in deviance. Crabbe (2006) concurred, stating that modernity beckons some individuals to become 'hedonistic sensation seekers' (155), and it would appear that industries have picked up on these carnal desires and exploit them to their advantage. However, in the context of commercialized gambling, it is unclear to what extent gamblers are in control of their sensation seeking behaviour. Modern casinos, including the Loose Slots Depot, are characterized by a carefully designed choice architecture (Crawford 2015) that deliberately targets the biochemical reward centres of players' brains, thereby hijacking their ability to control their behaviours. While not all players fall prey to such choice architecture, a notable percentage do (Grant and Bowling 2015), suggesting an asymmetrical power relation between casinos and players and calling into question the degree to which some players are actually exercising agency. This dilemma and those like it are situated in infrequent, but longstanding debates about the conceptualization of agency, autonomy, and structure with regards to the lived experience of leisure. Future research would do well to interrogate the expression of deviance in leisure as a phenomenon experienced as the exercise of choice nested in exploitative ideologies and structures. Therefore, it appears that we can re-create the baser, more depraved versions of ourselves, but at what cost? Are we creating, co-creating, or simply being used? At what point does the intrinsic desire for leisure escape (mis)lead us into a socially designed dead-end of a company's (or industry's) choosing? If numerous social/personal factors can expedite the evolution to problem gambling, like alcohol/drug use, depression, proximity to casinos, and negative life events (Reith and Dobbie 2013), then what societal checks are there against the exploitation of the individual? Or perhaps we simply live in a 'buyer beware' world.

In that vein, Spracklen and Spracklen (2012) suggested that when leisure becomes solely a product of consumption and commodification it becomes less useful for helping people find meaning. If this is true, then it follows that regardless of individuals' experiences of autonomy or control, there needs to be further exploration into leisure industries that exist solely for profit and that frequently impact their customers' health and wellbeing in negative ways: industries are

deviant, too. Foucault (1967/1984) said heterotopic sites are not ‘freely accessible’, and that entry is either ‘compulsory’ or involves a rite of passage (7). If the casino industry’s modus operandi is to create a surreal mystique that promises what it will never deliver, then perhaps its venues provide the pageantry to create the compulsion in its patrons.

Postscript

While the appeal and ambience of the Depot was lacking in my eyes, I could not deny that the patrons figuratively – and in some cases literally – felt right at ‘home’. This was in part likely due to the well-worn interior that suggested a ‘lived-in’ feeling that made the space comfortable, but the longevity of staff, in many cases, and more specifically the staff’s attention to the players’ needs and preferences, caused for a welcoming environment that offset the reality that they were gradually losing all of their money.

Jack ‘Slim’ Dalton did not, of course, receive a reply to his first letter, so he wrote again about two weeks later. Below is the closing paragraph of his note:

Finally, I lost a huge amount of money during the 6 months I was playing at [Depot]. I’m sure it is in the 6 figures plus. My hope is that the ‘crossed a line’ repercussion is harsh just to drive the point home, yet lenient enough for me to continue playing/dining/visiting [Depot]. After all, it was my home for 6 mos. and I made some real strong genuine friendship bonds with many employees. Please send a written response to the address on top of page 1.

Sincerely, [Jack Dalton]



Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Notes

1. The pronouns ‘I’ and ‘me’ refer to the first author throughout.
2. A pseudonym.
3. November 2017 Depot security/crime reports: What follows are snippets from some police and security reports from the previous month before the study commenced (provided by the GM of the casino via email): *We had a total of 101 reportable incidents for the month of November which included some of the following: 16 guest accidents with 2 guests being transported to the hospital; 12 guest illnesses with 6 guests being transported to the hospital; 12 theft reports; 10 trespasses with 1 arrest; 10 property damage reports; 10 complaints about player behavior; 6 disorderly conduct/altercations; 3 reports of vandalized vehicles in the parking lot as well as 1 vehicle reported stolen; 5 employee illnesses with 3 being transported to the hospital; 4 employee injuries with 1 being transported to the hospital; and 2 deaths, both guests (1 of a heart attack at a slot machine, 1 suicide in a room – player had lost \$32k in 48 hours). In the last four weeks within a 1-mile radius of our property, Las Vegas Metro reported some of the following calls for service: 60 disturbing the peace; 24 burglaries; 23 assault and batteries; 21 recovered vehicles; 19 stolen vehicles; 9 robberies; 3 persons with a gun; and 2 homicides.*
4. We use the term ‘parasitic’ to imply that casinos rely on the exploitation of the consumer to indulge, retain, and sustain gamblers through carefully designed venues, gaming systems, rewards, and the relationships of staff with guests (*cf.* Friedman, 2000; Loroz, 2004).
5. Many activities can be seen as unsafe or irresponsible in their very design (free climbing, illicit drug use, etc.), however, we imply that there are safeguards that can be put into place to decrease the amount of risk for most, and, therefore, they can potentially be seen as being undertaken responsibly.

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