

A Proposed Typology Of Odyssey Slot Machine Gamblers

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Abstract

This paper discusses the development of a typology of gamblers who play the Odyssey slot machine. Qualitative research methods were employed, using an ethnographic approach to the research setting. Two typologies are presented and discussed, one for the Odyssey Players and a second for the Odyssey Observers. While the potential application of these two typologies to the more general classification of all slot machine gamblers is unknown, it is believed that this paper represents the first study of its kind in the gaming industry. As such, it may provide a foundation for both academics who are interested in conducting further research in this area, and to gaming industry practitioners who may find the information useful in better understanding their customers. **KEY WORDS:** *Odyssey slot machines, qualitative research, ethnographic methods, casino gaming, customer typologies.*

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Introduction

The gaming industry has evolved into a high-technology business. Nowhere in the industry have the advances in computer technology been as pervasive as in the slot machine department. These advances come at a hefty price. Financial commitments of up to \$12,000 per machine, not including upkeep and upgrade costs, are becoming common. Casino owners must supplement traditional quantitative

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data collection and analysis with research aimed at understanding the factors that contribute to how a customer will feel about new products.

The Odyssey slot machine represents a new product that was recently introduced to the gaming market. It was designed to be the “next generation” of slot machine, with elaborate video graphics capabilities. The Odyssey’s video display is technologically advanced, which provides an unprecedented visual experience for the player. The typical Odyssey platform is that of a multi-game slot machine, which allows a player to select from any one of six different games of chance: 3 to 4 versions of poker, 2 reel slots, and 2 keno games. However, the Odyssey machine may also be purchased as a single game device if the casino requests such a configuration. Further, the Odyssey machine is a PC-based device, rather than a microprocessor board-based device. This distinction has apparently caused some casinos to be skeptical of the Odyssey’s security (International Gaming Institute, 1997).

Players usually opt to play the machine by using traditional push buttons or by using the machine’s touch-screen technology. Most traditional slot machines also give the player the option of pulling a slot handle (Brewer and Cummings, 1995). The Odyssey machines are equipped with a slot handle, but it can either be delivered as a functional device, or one that is only attached for appearances’ sake, depending upon a casino’s preference. Exhibit 1 summarizes the games that were available on each Odyssey machine in the casino research setting described below.

**Exhibit 1
Odyssey Slot Machines And Available Games**

<p align="center">MACHINE 1</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Phantom Belle Deuces Wild Deluxe Poker Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Star Spangles Keno</p>	<p align="center">MACHINE 2</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Dazzling Diamonds (Slot) Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Phantom Belle Double Bonus Poker</p>	<p align="center">MACHINE 3</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Dazzling Diamonds (Slot) Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Phantom Belle Double Bonus Poker</p>
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<p align="center">MACHINE 7</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Phantom Belle Deuces Wild Deluxe Poker Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Star Spangles Keno</p>	<p align="center">MACHINE 8</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Dazzling Diamonds (Slot) Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Phantom Belle Double Bonus Poker</p>	<p align="center">MACHINE 9</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Dazzling Diamonds (Slot) Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Phantom Belle Double Bonus Poker</p>
<p align="center">MACHINE 10</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Phantom Belle Deuces Wild Deluxe Poker Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Star Spangles Keno</p>	<p align="center">MACHINE 11</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Dazzling Diamonds (Slot) Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Phantom Belle Double Bonus Poker</p>	<p align="center">MACHINE 12</p> <p>Win-O-Meter Dazzling Diamonds (Slot) Phantom Belle Jacks or Better Fort Knox (Slot) Phantom Belle Double Double Poker Phantom Belle Double Bonus Poker</p>

During the time of this study, a large Las Vegas Strip casino (Casino), installed a bank of 12 Odyssey slot machines in a high traffic area as a test (Figure 1 shows the configuration of the Odyssey slot machines). Casino management agreed to provide the research setting for this study in order to examine certain issues about play on the Odyssey slot machines. However, due to the large size of the Casino, the 12 Odyssey machines represent only a minor aspect of overall slot machine play at the property. As of the time of this study, it was reported that the Odyssey slot machines in Las Vegas casinos were generally experiencing moderate-heavy levels of play, consistent with a pattern that is typical for new slot machine games that are introduced to the gaming market (International Gaming Institute, 1997).

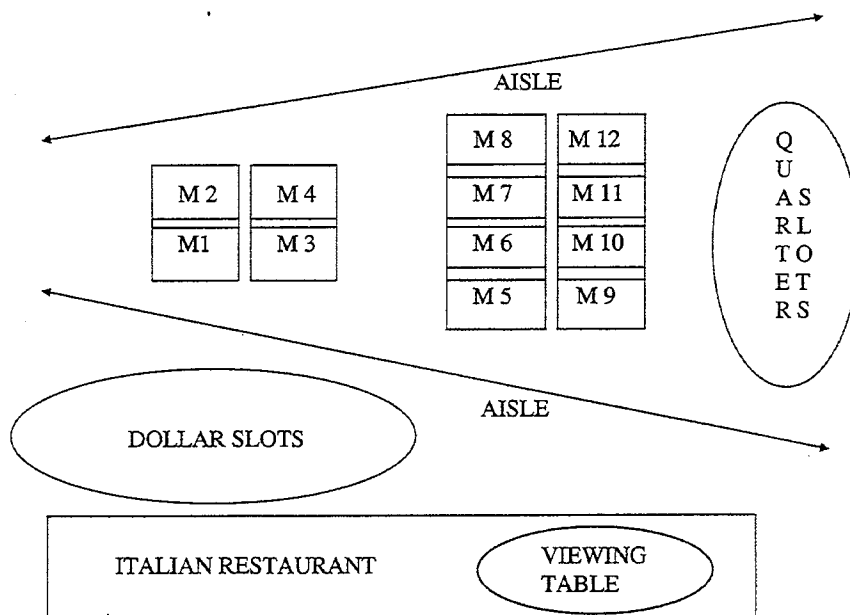


Figure 1. Odyssey Site

The goal of this research project is to describe the culture associated with Odyssey players at the Casino by using qualitative research methods. Through a combination of non-participant and participant observations, along with personal interviews and a review of proprietary videotapes from the Casino, the study examines gamblers' behavior while playing the slot machines. It is believed that no prior qualitative studies exist on this topic, either for traditional slot machines or for the Odyssey machines. Thus, the study should advance the general state of knowledge about customer behavior in the casino gaming industry.

Background

This project takes an ethnographic approach to studying the culture of the Odyssey slot machine players at the Casino. Since 1995, leading high-technology companies such as Intel, Hewlett Packard and Texas Instruments are increasingly using design ethnography research to better understand “user environments” and, thus, to build better products (Rayner, 1997). For the last year or two, ethnography – a branch of anthropology that deals with the scientific description of cultures - has been gaining favor with other high-tech leaders. Some product marketing managers even insist that it is the use of qualitative research that gives them an edge in product design (Rayner, 1997).

Qualitative researchers observe customers, identify patterns in behavior and develop an understanding of why these patterns exist. This understanding is then used to improve product design tailored to the customers’ desires. Personal and cultural tastes, aspirations and attitudes have to be understood and factored into the design of new machines. Because of its focus on sociocultural patterns of action, ethnography gives primacy to the observation of behavior and speech events that occur naturally. Rather than asking people to comment about what they think they usually do or say, ethnographers prefer to observe them doing it. (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994).

Within the gaming industry, little collective knowledge exists as to why players choose to play certain types of slot machines, or how they behave while they play a slot machine. Although gaming literature is replete with studies of problem gambling and the psychology of problem gamblers, relatively little attention has been focused on the behavior of people who gamble simply for fun, to be entertained, or other reasons. This study, therefore, adds to a body of research aimed at better understanding non-pathological gambling behavior and the culture of gamblers.

Three recent studies that focus on the behavior of gamblers are particularly relevant to this study. Walker (1992a) examined the presence of irrational thinking on the part of video poker machine players by recording their speech acts while playing a machine. He also discusses social interaction aspects associated with playing video poker, including the unwritten social rules that govern the activity of playing poker machines. In another study, Walker (1992b) presented a sociocognitive theory of gambling behavior, and classified gamblers into distinct types based on their motivation for gambling. These types included occasional,

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regular, serious, and social gamblers. The third study (Griffiths, 1993) also discussed gambler behavior from a cognitive perspective. Griffiths used the "thinking aloud" method in an attempt to discern the underlying thought patterns and motivations of video machine players during their play. Under this approach, players were asked to verbalize every thought that came to their mind as they played. Their responses were recorded and analyzed to gain insight into their cognitive state while playing.

The impact of the physical environment on the behavior of customers has also begun to receive attention from researchers. For example, Bitner (1992) discusses the impact of the physical environment on the behavior of customers. She defines the term "servicescape" to mean the manmade physical surroundings that are part of any customer service setting. Another study (McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley, 1993) gives an encapsulated description of the workings of an urban farmers' market. Like the research involved in this study, it affords the opportunity to view a conventional setting from a novel perspective. Thus, although neither of these two studies is directly related to the behavior of gamblers, they provide an added perspective for recognizing the importance of the research setting in this case.

Odyssey Player Typology

As stated above, an ethnographic approach was used for this study. A total of 15 on-site observations were made of the research setting at the Casino over a four-week period.

In the Player Typology, the "serious" players are those who want to win money from their play. Social players, on the other hand, would probably like to win money, but they play principally for social reasons, such as the entertainment provided by playing slot machines, or an opportunity to interact with other people in the casino.

Typologies of Odyssey players and observers were developed to describe the participants within the setting. The Odyssey Player Typology is presented in Figure 2 and categorizes slot machine players within a 2-dimensional matrix. The horizontal dimension of the matrix represents a player's duration of play in the setting, while the vertical dimension describes the demeanor of their play, either primarily serious or primarily social by its nature.

A 2-dimensional matrix was also developed to classify four types of Odyssey observers who were participants in the Casino's setting. A discussion of the Odyssey observer types is contained in the next section of this paper.

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money, but they play principally for social reasons, such as the entertainment provided by playing slot machines, or an opportunity to interact with other people in the casino. Serious players, then, might be more solitary in nature, wager the maximum bet on any given hand (pull), and be extremely focused on the task of winning. Social players would tend to play with other people, or even in a group, and their behavior in the setting would be more gregarious. Not as solely focused on winning as the serious players, they are more likely to vary the size of their bet, rather than betting the maximum amount allowable.

Therefore, the four quadrants of the Player Typology represent a distinct type of Odyssey slot machine player. The four major types were characterized as follows:

- Serious Short Timers (SSTs)
- Homesteaders
- Fun Lovers (FLs)
- Casual Curiosity Seekers (CCSs)

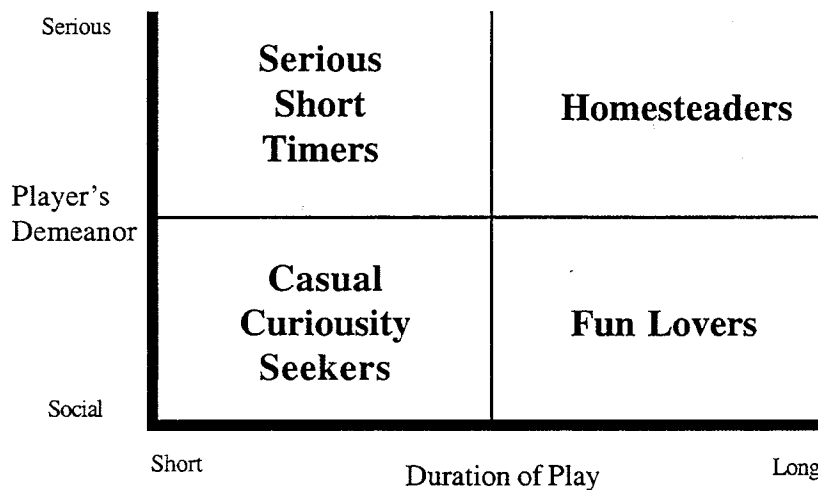


Figure 2. Odyssey Player Typology

Odyssey Player Descriptions

SSTs are players who participate in the setting only for brief intervals at any one time. They are perceived of as serious gamblers who want to win money from the machine during their play. They do not socialize in the setting nearly as much as their short-term counterparts, the CCSs, nor do they tend to switch back and forth between the various games on the Odyssey.

Homesteaders are players who are serious gamblers and also appear to be focused on winning money from the machine during their play. They usually play for an extended period of time on the same machine. They do not socialize in the

setting as much as Fun Lovers would, nor do they switch back and forth between the various games available on the Odyssey. Because of the length of their play, Homesteaders tend to play from a seated position, although they may start out by standing at a machine before actually “zoning in” on that machine for their play.

CCSs are characterized as social players who appear to play the Odyssey machines primarily for their entertainment value. They may be players who are novice gamblers, or merely curious about the new style of Odyssey slot machines. As a result, they are more likely to be machine-hoppers or game-switchers than SSTs or Homesteaders. They do not play the Odyssey machines for as long a time period as the Homesteaders or Fun Lovers, and are more likely to do so entirely while standing in front of the machine. CCSs are more likely to play either with an observer, or with another player on the machine next to them, or even as part of a group than either SSTs or Homesteaders, who are much less social players.

Fun Lovers can be distinguished from CCSs due to the longer length of their play, and from Homesteaders by the primarily social demeanor of their behavior. Because of their longer length of play, Fun Lovers tend to be seated while playing, versus CCSs, who may either sit or stand while they gamble on the Odyssey machines. Like CCSs, they may be machine-hoppers but, unlike CCSs, they will remain in the setting for extended periods of time.

Odyssey Observer Typology

The other type of actors who participated in the setting were the Observers. Employing an analytic approach similar to the one described above for the Player Typology, a typology for Observers of the Odyssey slot machines was also developed. Odyssey Observers were also grouped into four distinct types:

- Pause Brieflys (casino visitors who “pause briefly” in the area of the Odyssey machines)
- Companions
- Counselors
- Voyeurs

Figure 3 shows a 2-dimensional schema that was developed to classify the four types of Odyssey observers. The horizontal axis depicts an observer’s degree of commitment to the setting, represented as either inactive or active depending upon behavior. The vertical axis represents whether an observer has any association with a player in the setting; either knowing a player, or not. In this sense, the vertical axis is not a continuum. It is a choice based upon the observer’s background or reasons for being in the setting. Note, however, that an observer could move “up the ladder” from status as a “stranger” to having knowledge of a player during the time in the setting. For example, if an observer were to engage a player in conversation, the observer would make a transition from a being a total stranger to someone who “knows” another person in the setting. The reverse, however, would not be true; that is, one could not move “down” the axis from knowing someone to becoming a total stranger.

Thus, both Pause Brieflys and Voyeurs are strangers to the players in the setting. They are distinguished by their commitment to the setting, primarily reflected in the length of time that they spend in it. Voyeurs tend to be people who have a higher commitment to the activity in the setting. They tend to remain in the setting for an extended period of time, whereas Pause Brieflys enter and exit the setting in a relatively short time.

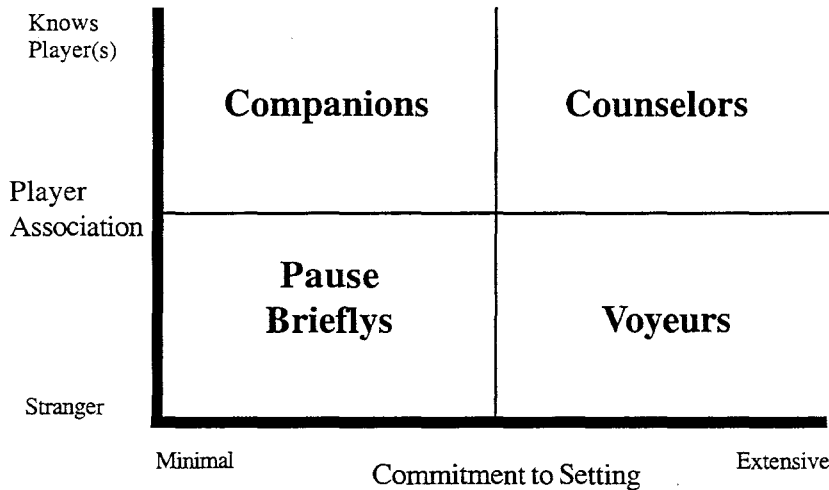


Figure 3. Odyssey Observers Typology

Both Companions and Counselors have an association of some kind with a player in the setting. However, Companions and Counselors are distinguished by their commitment to the setting, but it is a commitment that is not measured by length of time as it is in the case of the Pause Brieflys and Voyeurs. Rather, their commitment is represented by their behavior relative to a player in the setting. Companions have a very leisurely relationship with a player, doing little more than merely observing play on the machine. Counselors, however, become very involved with their player, in effect becoming almost a co-player.

These four types capture the characteristics of the majority of the observers in the research setting. Collectively, they appear to adequately represent the distinctive behaviors demonstrated by the majority of the observers who were involved in the setting. The major characteristics of each of the four types are discussed next, beginning with Pause Brieflys.

Odyssey Observer Descriptions

The Pause Briefly type of observer represents a person who only briefly enters the setting, or hovers around the margins of the setting in a curious fashion, then leaves the area. Pause Brieflys can act either singly or in a group, but their

distinguishing feature is their short length of stay in the area. In some cases, Pause Brieflys are in the setting for as little as 30 seconds. This time span tends toward the short end of the range, even for Pause Brieflys. Their decision to remain in the area for about 4-5 minutes, however, would reclassify them as Voyeurs (as described below.) Also, versus Voyeurs, who probably are by themselves when they are in the setting, the Pause Brieflys are more likely to enter the setting either with someone else, or as part of a group.

It is not known whether Pause Brieflys return to the setting at a later time, and if so, whether they become players at that time, perhaps as a result of their prior observations. Such a conclusion is presently beyond the scope of this study. In any case, Pause Brieflys are more than just part of the stream of traffic flow past and through this area of the Casino. They represent a distinct aspect of the culture of the setting under study.

The Companion type of observer is best characterized as a person who accompanies a player in order to observe the play. However, Companions are passive in that they stop short of taking an active role in advising the player as to how to play the machine (e.g., which game to select, how much to bet on each hand (pull), which cards to hold (if Poker is played), etc.). The Companion observer may also focus on watching the play not only of the companion, but also of other players or observers in the setting. Further, some Companions tend to be nomads in the sense that they wander into and out of the setting as their player plays the machine. Because their role is largely one of passive accompaniment, they are free to move about, observe other players, and even leave and return as they desire. Finally, Companions can be individuals, or an entire group of people who accompany one or more players.

The Counselor observer represents an individual who accompanies a player into the setting, and closely monitors play on the machine. The Counselor takes an extremely active role in the player's play, bordering in some cases on becoming a joint player with the person seated at the machine, by touching the screen, pointing out features of the game, or advising the player on which cards to hold (if Poker is the game of choice). Because of their relatively active involvement with a player, Counselors tend to be lone individuals, as opposed to Companions, who might observe singly or in a group. Further, Counselors tend to stay put, as their active role requires them to remain near their playing companion. They may stand or sit, but often take up a seated position at the machine next to the player if that machine is open. Thus, they may obstruct play on that machine to an extent, unless another player asks them to get up and move so that they can access the machine at which the Counselor is seated.

The Voyeur observers are solitary individuals. However, they do not appear to share any type of relationship with a player that characterizes both Counselors and Companions. Voyeurs appear to be fascinated by observing the activity in the setting in an almost voyeuristic sense; hence, their name. They remain on and around the fringes of the setting, and usually fix their gaze upon the activity within some portion of the setting, or the play at a single machine. Hence, although they are the least active and least noticeable participants in the setting, they also make up a distinct part of the culture associated with playing Odyssey slot machines.

Although the researchers were unable to document examples of either Voyeurs or Pause Brieflys becoming players in the setting, it seems likely that both types may eventually become players. The Voyeurs are more likely to make the

transition while they are in the setting than Pause Briefly. Since the Pause Briefly typically exit the setting rather quickly, it is evident that they will only become players if they decide to return at a later time.

Summary Observations and Study Limitations

In summary, three general observations may be drawn from studying the culture associated with playing the Odyssey slot machines:

- An ethnographic approach made sense, given a lack of previous available research on the Odyssey machines and the researchers' low degree of familiarity with the setting.
- Well-defined Player types exist in the Casino, according to both their length of play and their playing demeanor.
- Observer types also exist in the Casino, according to their Player association and their commitment to the setting.

Given the exploratory nature of this study, few direct conclusions can be drawn at this juncture about the nature of play on the Odyssey slot machines. In particular, more time in the setting would be needed for confirmation of the typologies developed thus far. Also, limited triangulation was conducted in other settings to confirm the observations arising from this study. Further, only a limited number of participant interviews were conducted and the observations in this study were predominantly of a non-participant nature. All of these considerations augured for the development of summary observations, rather than definitive conclusions.

Implications for Future Research

Although a qualitative study of the Odyssey slot machines yielded several significant insights, much additional work remains to be done. The following issues need to be explored more fully through a future research agenda:

- How important is the location of the machines within the casino? The Odyssey machines were situated in a high traffic area of the casino. It is uncertain whether similar observations would be recorded if the machines had been located elsewhere.
- A comparative analysis of this study's player characteristics should be undertaken which would include other settings, other types of slot machines and market segments. Such research would determine whether this study's observations are unique only to this setting, or whether they can be generalized beyond the scope of this project.
- Are the Odyssey machines capturing the target market, as set forth by the casino or the manufacturer? It was beyond the scope of the current study to try to identify if either Casino or the manufacturer was accomplishing this goal.
- How well does the Odyssey Player Typology match playing styles and gambling motivations? A considerable amount of quantitative research has been conducted in the areas of player motivation and gambling styles. An open issue is whether there is congruence in the findings of both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

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