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## The Las Vegas phenomenon

Juliet Reubens

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*

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THE LAS VEGAS PHENOMENON

by

Juliet Reubens

Bachelor of Arts  
New York University  
1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

**Master of Arts Degree**  
**Department of Anthropology and Ethnic Studies**  
**College of Liberal Arts**

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**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**  
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## Thesis Approval

The Graduate College

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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The Thesis prepared by

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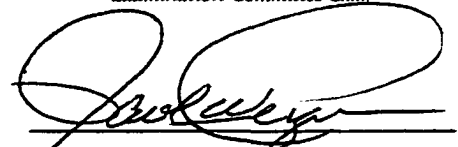
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The Las Vegas Phenomenon

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

  
Examination Committee Chair

  
Dean of the Graduate College

  
Examination Committee Member

  
Examination Committee Member

  
Graduate College Faculty Representative

ABSTRACT

**The Las Vegas Phenomenon**

by

Juliet Reubens

Dr. William Jankowiak, Examination Committee Chair  
Associate Professor of Anthropology  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

This thesis supposes that people gambling in Las Vegas are engaged in religious-like and transformative experiences, ideas, and behaviors. Those which are religious-like are categorized into separate groups. These separate groups are Magic, Charms and Jinxes, Ritual, Altered-States of Consciousness, and Divining each having a subsequent section in my thesis. The transformative experiences, ideas, and behaviors are like-wise categorized into separate groups. These separate groups and subsequent sections are Adults at Play, Fantasy, Theming, and Rebellion. People who play slot machines are studied and to them is applied the theory developed by Luhrmann in the book Persuasions of the Witches Craft that people in modern Britain who engage in witchcraft do so in order to achieving a childlike enchantment of adulthood.



Findings are that there are indeed similarities between Luhrmann's British witches and gamblers in Las Vegas, and that they share certain elements and motives. Las Vegas style gambling evokes strong elements of a return to youthful world views. Here adults are encouraged to play games, watch magic shows, eat as much of whatever they want, indulge in sensory stimulation without the burden of obligation, role play, and ultimately suspend their disbelief as they slip into a fantasy world which would place them in a state of being more akin to a time of youthful optimism, when the world was mysterious and magical, pre-rational, care-free and innocent.

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## PREFACE

When I first visited Las Vegas as an adult I found myself immersed in what could have easily been another planet. The Strip and downtown areas contained gigantic casinos full of flashing lights, the sound of coins plunking into metal trays, soft musical jingles repeated over and over again, chiming bells, and the occasional outbursts and shouts of victory or defeat. Yet, however attention grabbing this bombardment of visual and auditory data seemed to me to be, the people transfixed to the slot machines appeared utterly unfazed. Had I not known that they were gambling I would guess they were engaged in some form of ritual worship. Their focus on their machines had a unique intensity as they repeated their play again, and again, and again. Most of them sat alone, transfixed, their machine's face reflecting in their eyes or their glasses. The charge of excitement in the air was quite real. I had to ask myself, what on Earth is going on here?

In Researching American Culture Conrad Kottak writes the "critics who look only at the product miss what is most significant to the anthropologist, the interaction between

the cultural product and the society that receives it (and whether it is received at all)" (1982:98). My many foreign travels have taught me that Las Vegas with all it connotes appears to be imbedded in virtually all cultures. I couldn't recall when I had first heard of Las Vegas. To me, an awareness of this city, like my knowledge of baseball, has simply always been part of who I am and what I know. My travels have also taught me that in terms of international fascination, Las Vegas eclipses New York. I lived for 34 years in New York City. Whenever I traveled people asked where I was from and I would answer, "New York", a response which was usually met with indifference. However, since moving to Las Vegas, when I am abroad and am asked where I am from and I respond: "Las Vegas", eyes light up, big grins appear and people usually give me an elliptical: "Oh, Las Vegas!" and they want to know more. If they have been to Las Vegas, they usually tell me about something they saw, how much they won, which was their favorite casino, and so forth. There is an immediate bond struck between us, the common experience of a most uncommon place. A place which personifies an intensification of American culture which appears to be evolving into the global fusion of local cultures (more imagined than real) all come together in a flash: Las Vegas.

Kottak continues: "It is likely that all successful cultural products blend old and new, draw on familiar themes, rearrange them in novel ways, and thus win a lasting place in the imaginations of whatever culture creates or accepts them" (1982:93). I have yet to come across any culture or cultural entity which does not accept Las Vegas. Even religions with dogmas strictly forbidding gambling are being forced to adapt to gambling's prevalence. Gambling itself is so simple, basic, and omnipresent that I believe upon it people fix all sorts of cultural variances and personal beliefs which can then be transposed to analyze culture and society. In other words, like language, it is universal with cultural and social variances. This can range from a couple of kids with a pair of dice, to the ever-encroaching inchoate global culture already bespeckled with casinos.

Gambling is certainly nothing new. About gambling's history chair of the Australian Institute for Gambling Research McMillen writes that:

Gambling is one of the few social activities that occurs in nearly all cultures and in every period of time: in this respect it can be said to be virtually a universal phenomenon in human societies (Wykes 1964; France 1974). Chinese gambling, for example, can be traced back more than 4,000 years. Excavations at Ur (2000 BC), Crete (1800 BC), Egypt (1600 BC) and India (1000 BC) have unearthed dice and gaming boards; betting on horse-racing was common among the Hittites (4000 BC). Archaeological records show that for over

2,000 years many ancient Asian and Arabian societies have tossed tokens or coins to guide decisions; similar games were popular with the Greeks and Roman legions. Gaming was so popular with soldiers during the Crusades that in order to maintain discipline King Richard I forbade gambling among soldiers below the rank of knight. Governments and philanthropists long ago recognized the potential of popular gambling to generate extra revenues for public works. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and Queen Anne, state lotteries raised funds for London's water supply, to pay the salaries of civil servants, and to finance the colonization of America. In North America throughout the eighteenth century, lotteries were an accepted means of financing public projects such as bridges and roads, churches and universities (1996:6).

Many casinos attempt to emphasize the sense of ancient continuity. Obvious examples include Caesar's Palace, the Luxor, and Excalibur. Gaming chips have been traditionally made of clay (Seymore 1998) as many are to this day. According to Schmandt-Besserat, similar counting devices, or tokens, precede writing and first appear just after the neolithic revolution in 9000 BC, probably as a consequence of agriculture. "Archaeological work to date suggests that a prehistoric counting device led ultimately to writing" (Schmandt-Besserat 1992:6). So far as I have been able to find out, casinos are the only place where clay chips and tokens are still used, some 11,000 years later.

I would like to thank Jack Reubens, Barbara Wise, my committee, Janet Six, Pastor Hilda and Denis Pecoraro, Dr. Martha Knack, Dr. Jennifer Thomas, Dr. Frank Peters, and Dr. Neni Panourgia, for all their help.

## CHAPTER 1

### EXPLAINING LAS VEGAS

Is gambling in Las Vegas a valid subject for anthropological analysis? Isn't Las Vegas simply a frill without significance or meaning? To help answer this I shall turn to Leach who in his introduction to Political Systems in Highland Burma writes that:

It is precisely [the] customary frills which provide the social anthropologist with his primary data. Logically aesthetics and ethics are identical (Wittgenstein 1922: 6.421). If we are to understand the ethical rules of society, it is aesthetics that we must study. In origin the details of custom may be a historical accident; but for the living individuals in a society such details can never be irrelevant, they are part of the total system of interpersonal communication within the group (Leach 1954:12).

Regarding the popularity of gambling Smith writes the following about slot players, the population examined in this thesis, demonstrating that in 1991 people spent more money on gambling than on going to the movies.

During 1991 Americans gambled more than US\$304 billion in legal games (Christiansen 1992a:22), wagering about 6.3 per cent of their personal income. In fact, between 1982 and 1991, legal gambling wagers

increased by more than 142 per cent while personal income increased by approximately 81 per cent (Christiansen 1992a: 37). Over the past several years, the fictional 'US Gambling, Inc.' (the combined 'win' of legal gambling enterprises) has ranked in the top twenty of the Forbes Sales 500, a listing of the most successful US business enterprises; the 1991 total of US\$26.7 billion in gambling revenue ('sales') places 'US Gambling' in nineteenth place, just ahead of American Express (Christiansen 1992b: 18-19). A 'real world' comparison of popular leisure activities brings the numbers into focus: Americans spent five times more money on gambling games than they did on movie tickets during 1991 (US\$26.7 billion versus US\$4.8 billion). The economic impact and resulting power of legal gambling interests are clearly implied by the magnitude and rate of growth of their wealth (Smith 1996: 100-101)

How can anthropology help explain the existence, persistence, and success of Las Vegas? One way would be to make an ethnological comparison by taking Luhrmann's theory from her study of British witches, applying it to a population of gamblers in Las Vegas and seeing if in this way the Las Vegas phenomenon can be explained. In Persuasions of the Witch's Craft, Luhrmann states that the act of being a witch has the effect of recreating a childhood world, and therefore enchanting adulthood (1989:18). She also says that play, fantasy, and imagination are striking and central features of the magic of witchcraft. Fantasy, imagination, and play as well as the conspicuousness of magic both as performed personally by gamblers and professionally by performers also happen to be striking and central features of Las Vegas. Regarding these features Luhrmann writes the following:



The other striking feature of the process was the centrality of play. Magic gives magicians the opportunity to play – a serious play, but nevertheless a rule-defined, separate context in which they identify with their imaginative conceptions, and act out the fantasies and visions of another world. They find their increased capacity for play a great resource, and indeed through this play there are real psychotherapeutic benefits from the practice. And there is a remarkable extension of this play structure into the realm of belief. The ideas and theories of magical practice are for magicians both assertions about the real world, and 'let's pretend' fantasies about strange powers, wizards, even dragons. Magicians treat these ideas and theories sometimes as factual assertions, sometimes as fantasy, without necessarily defining to themselves where they stand. It is as if they were playing with belief – and yet they take themselves seriously, act on the results of their divinations, talk about the implications of their ideas. What this really means is that they are not very concerned about the objective 'truth' of their beliefs – a nonchalance at variance with modern ideals of rationality. That magicians are aware of this variance, and that they take steps to explain it, is one of the most interesting features of this material" (1989:13).

My hypothesis is that people gambling in Las Vegas are engaged in religious-like and transformative activities, ideologies, and behaviors in order to effect their world view. To validate this hypothesis I have studied people who play slot machines and to them I have applied Luhrmann's theory to see if they are indeed engaged in activities aimed at achieving a childlike enchantment of adulthood or, an effected world view. I have categorized those which are religious-like into separate groups. These separate groups are Magic, Charms and Jinxes, Ritual, Altered-States of Consciousness, and Divining each having a subsequent section

in my thesis. I have like-wise categorized the transformative activities, ideologies, and behaviors into separate groups. These separate groups and subsequent sections are Adults at Play, Fantasy, Theming, and Rebellion.

I find that yes, there are indeed similarities between Luhrmann's British witches and gamblers in Las Vegas, and that they share certain elements and motives. I shall further explore these ideas while identifying the theoretical and methodological problems inherent in this type of cultural analysis. I shall also present the methods by which I intend to explore the validity of this analogous relationship. I shall look at how gamblers in Las Vegas and Luhrmann's witches are alike by comparing how both groups use play, fantasy and role playing, magic, the concepts of charms and jinxes, rituals, divining, altered states of consciousness, and rebellion. These various classifications shall be put into two broader categories, the first being those whose behaviors and artifacts are designed to achieve a cosmological engagement and therefore come under the category of religious, and the second category consisting of activities which are expected to be personally transformative. Finally I shall conclude this thesis with a discussion as to its findings, determining whether or not

this comparison is valid and the subsequent implications of these findings.

But what about money? Well, there is that chance, albeit remote, that one could hit the big jackpot and retire to a life of continual leisure, poo-pooing those who have stuck to Weber's Protestant work ethic, and I shall indeed address this greed for easy money further along, but for now I shall ask that the issue of money be walletted for the moment because I am going to propose that something else is at stake within the casino walls. As Malaby put it, it is reality and the player's place within it that is up for grabs (1997:24).

My research thus far has revealed that Las Vegas style gambling evokes strong elements of a return to youthful world views. Here adults are encouraged to play games, watch magic shows, eat as much of whatever they want, indulge in sensory stimulation without the burden of obligation, role play, and ultimately suspend their disbelief as they slip into a fantasy world which would place them in a state of being more akin to a time of youthful optimism, when the world was mysterious and magical, pre-rational, care-free and innocent. Entertainers and performers add their contributions to this exciting sensation. So far as I know, Las Vegas has more magic shows for adults than any other place on earth.

After conducting over 25 interviews and engaging in countless conversations and chit-chats about Las Vegas over the past two years I have come to the conclusion that the feelings arrived at by gambling are as important as the money, if not more important, to the casual gambler<sup>1</sup>. If people were simply trying to maximize on slots, then why do so many people not play the maximum amount on a slot machine? This seemingly irrational behavior becomes quite rational within the context of the explanation which this thesis proposes.

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<sup>1</sup>There are of course, professional gamblers, mostly poker players and sports book wagers. Since our population consists of slot players, professional gamblers fall outside the scope of the analysis.

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

I shall break the data down into two broad categories entitled 'Religion' and 'Transformation'. These two categories shall contain subcategories derived from Luhmann and from the ethnographic data in order to effectively argue that Luhmann's ideas about the enchantment of adulthood through a recreation of childhood as indeed one of the products which Las Vegas is selling to the 2.3 million visitors who flock here every month. In this way the data can be sorted through, looking at how the Las Vegas gambler's experience is and is not analogous to an engagement in child-like activities while perhaps obtaining some information on modern peoples' ideas about themselves, their world views, and their notion regarding their own autonomy within that world view.

Upon the completion of this thesis I will have spent over 26 months living on the field site. Some of the best and most in-depth interviews, however, took place on airplanes and in locations outside of Las Vegas. People would talk passionately about the city they tended to either love or

hate. In Las Vegas I interviewed people watching the pirate show in front of the Treasure Island casino, walking along the part of Las Vegas Boulevard between Tropicana and Sahara known as The Strip, and the covered, pedestrian mall section of Fremont Street in downtown Las Vegas. I also discussed Las Vegas with people within the city limits of both Las Vegas and Henderson.

I decided to spend sometime outside of Las Vegas in a resort community in Mexico where I knew I would be able to find a large group of people who frequently visited and gambled in Las Vegas. This is because I found it difficult and intrusive to interview slots players<sup>2</sup> while they were gambling and also because my better interviews have been conducted outside of Las Vegas. I also observed people playing slot machines all throughout Las Vegas from supermarkets and car washes to Caesar's Palace and The Bellagio.

I focus on non-table game players for this thesis. Regarding the universality of slots players Dickerson writes that:

The persistent playing of slots is associated with the learning of a stereotypical habit that mirrors the machine events then it is reasonable to expect this factor to be common to all human beings and provides us with some understanding of the universal use of these games in casinos and clubs around the world. This is supported by one negative finding, that persistent play

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<sup>2</sup>People who play slot machines.

is not associated with any one type of personality. The psychological basis of the popularity of slots is also associated with beliefs and illusory expectations of winning. (Dickerson 1996:162-163).

In planning this study I have encountered a problem likewise encountered by Malinowski when setting about to study the Trobriand Islanders. Both of us had undertaken the task of studying a subject with no written or explicitly expressed code of law (Malinowski 1922:12). Because of this I have turned to popular literature and film in addition to talking to slots and video poker players about why they like to play slot machines, why they liked Las Vegas, what they liked best about Las Vegas and casinos, and their ideas and feelings about luck, and if they ever felt they could tell whether or not a machine was going to hit. I have also had many informal and uncounted conversations on this general subject with players before I officially began my research.

I also interviewed several tourists who were in Las Vegas but did not report themselves as slots players per se. They did indeed occasionally play a slot machine, just not regularly or as a primary activity, but rather as a way to kill time or something to do with spare change. I ask this group questions about what they like about Las Vegas, the casinos, and so forth. I include this data because it is relevant to the appeal of Las Vegas as an adult field of fantasy and play.

Additional data was gathered through countless hours of observation (with myself gambling only rarely) in casinos and also from "Today in Las Vegas", a magazine about local entertainment. The source for the statistical data is The Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority at <http://www.lasvegas24hours.com>.

I have also researched the topic and will present these findings. My informants are not representative of all those who have ever dropped a coin into a slot machine, however, the fact that their answers fall consistently within the scope of Luhrmann's arguments and demonstrate either religious or transformative behaviors, provides evidence for this study's validity. This is not a statistical analysis of gambling in any way.



## CHAPTER 3

### A SELECTIVE REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature researched for this topic divides into two fundamental categories. The first involves the actual events, activities, people and places related to gambling. The second is more reactionary rather than generative and includes works related to sociocultural responses and artistic representations of items in the first category. Items in both categories are symbiotic rather than mutually exclusive; each type gladly accepting and utilizing the feedback from the other to create an appropriate image.

Contained within the first category are ethnographies and analyses of specific cultures and culture forms which use gambling, games, or sports as their specific focus through which to reveal larger cultural features (Carney 1998, Daye 1997, DeBoer 1993, Goodale 1987, Greenberg 1996, Linhart, et al 1998, Maclean 1984, McSkimming 1996, Oxfeld 1993, Siegel 1986, Weller 1996). These authors have used gambling as catalysts for other subject matter rather than gambling as a subject. Devereux (1980) examines the social aspects of gambling. A few ethnographies did have specific forms of

gambling within a specific culture as their subject (Geertz 1996, Zimmer 1987). Tubry (1987) looks at symbols in Spain while Mitchell (1988) examined gambling as symbolic exchange. Copious works are written on Indian gambling (Cozzetto 1995, Cozzetto 1996, Smith 1993, Suzuki 1988) and because of this, this particular area of literature merits a separate and forthcoming review to cull out what is relevant to the anthropological problem proposed in this thesis.

Some ethnographies deal with specific social constructions manifested and negotiated through gambling (Heine 1991, Hunt 1985, Muhni 1993, Sexton 1987) while others look at gambling communities as cultures in and of themselves (Anness 1978, Cunningham 1982, McMillen 1996, Rosecrance 1985, Zhao 1979).

Linguistic studies specific to gambling (Landsberg 1974, Powel 1974) are very illuminating; the fact is that language usage is one of the most important ways in which social self is portrayed. One study reverses the subjects and refers to metaphors as gambling with language (Guetti 1993), interesting, especially since "gambling with language" is, in itself, quite metaphorical.

Another popular area of literature is on gambling as work. These studies focus on gambling as business and industry (Abt, et al 1985, Eade 1996, Frey and Carns 1988, Kent-Lemon 1984, Shaw 1956, Solomon 1994) and on the individual "career" gambler (Hayano 1984, Lesieur 1984).

Works in the social sciences on specific forms of gambling include writings about horse racing (Abt and Smith 1981, Case 1991, Downey 1967), bingo (DeLind and Bryant 1980, King 1985), lotteries, (Ezell 1995), sports betting (Ignatin 1984, Sasuly 1982, Smith 1988), slot machines (Fey 1997) and last but not least, cheating (Bowyer 1982). A work worth including here is John Scarne's Complete Guide to Gambling (1961) which is considered the principal how-to book on gambling and is a good reference tool for a non-gambling academician.

Another specific manifestation of gambling is the casino, and writings on casinos include the rather interesting nuts and bolts of running one (Kilby and Fox 1998, Lewis 1998, Macomber 1984) and writings on specific casino types (McMillen 1991, Smith 1981, Smith 1990).

Psychological studies of gamblers and their behavior (Abbott 1991, Abt et al 1985, Bergler 1957, Kusyszyn 1984, Maloney and Silverman 1978) focus on motivation and proclivities while others examine gambling as pathology (Lesieur and Custer 1984). Scimecca (1980) has created a psychological typology of gamblers. Much is also written on gambling in terms of economic impact (Kaplan 1984, Skolnick 1984, Thaler 1994), and politics, policy and legality (Blakey 1984, Cornish 1978, Eadington 1984, Evans and Hance 1998, Hausch and Lo 1994, Reuter 1984). Despite the

multitudinous amount of material falling under this rubric, this is an area of literature which is not reviewed in depth due to the lack of relevance for my thesis. Most of the sociological studies of gambling which I have encountered thus far (Frey 1984, Frey and Eadington 1984) have focused on these broad areas of analysis rather than on issues of magic, identity, ethnology and other relevant areas of research. Those studies which are relevant have been incorporated into this literature review.

The next theme is the ever-present moral, religious, and ethical debates on gambling (Charles 1924, Colson 1987, Glass 1924, O'Brien 1998, Rodgers 1997). These studies have been included because they offer insight into the parallels between gambling and religion as well as clues to the seductive qualities of gambling.

There is also a rich body of literature on the historical aspects of gambling, from pre-Columbian America (Blom 1932, Wasserman 1983), ancient Old World history (Disney 1729, Toner 1995), not-so-ancient Europe (18<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) (Clapson 1992, Kavanagh 1993, Rosdeitcher 1997), the early United States in general (Chafetz 1960, Fabian 1983, Fabian 1990, Samuels 1992, Schatzberg 1993), and, more specifically, the American West (Crontz and Katz 1991, Hicks 1996).

Writings also incorporate specific gambling centers as their subject matter, gambling centers like Atlantic City, (Rubenstein 1982, Rubenstein 1984, Smith 1978), Cuba (Schwartz 1997), and of course, Las Vegas (Berman 1996, Brown and Marshall 1995, Coakley et al 1982, Findlay 1988, Hughs 1998, Johnston 1992, Mataga 1997, Moehring 1989, Wilcock 1997). And, of course, Las Vegas is not without its various and sundry characters, mobsters, celebrities, business men and the like (Balboni 1996, Nash 1973, Smith 1995, Smith 1997).

Also worth including are studies about the American West which don't focus specifically on gambling (Abbey 1988, Adams 1993, Dary 1995, Etulain 1996, McKanna 1997, Van Tassell 1916), as these works speak to the wild, adventurous, and attractive nature of the American frontier and the lawlessness, danger, and sense of wrangling, if you will, the untamed American spirit, all embodied within imaginings of the American West. Studies include the contemporary American West as subject matter (Abbott 1993, Johnson 1996, Rothman 1998) as well as cowboy culture (Allen 1998, Allmendinger 1992, Dary 1981, Davis 1992, Konrad 1983, Mitchell 1994, Savage 1979, Smithson 1983, Stern and Stern 1993).

There are very relevant studies that focus on tourism in general (Seaton 1994), theme and amusement parks (Davis

1997, Gibson 1976, Gottdiener 1997, Rugoff 1995), urban entertainment centers (Hannigan 1998), as well as sports and ethics (Jones 1992), historical writings on sports (Enriquez 1968, Stern 1948), sports and identity (MacClancy 1996), sociological essays on sports (Nixon and Frey 1996), as well as specific sport forms, such as baseball (Scheinin 1994, White 1996), and blood sports (Blanchard 1992, Charles 1970, Chick 1992, Donlon 1990, Dundes 1993, Dundes 1994, Francis 1967, Francisco 1980, Geertz 1996 (again), Mascuñana 1989, McDonald 1997, Parker 1986, Scott 1983, Walker 1927). The blood sport literature reviewed here is of the kind which always involves wagering and therefore excludes bullfighting.

Other relevant studies include those on the psychological aspects of making decisions and taking risks (Abt and Smith 1981, Biswas 1997, Boon 1991, Gambling & Risk Taking Conference 1994, Hoffman 1996), chance (Keren and Wagenaar 1988, Kreps 1988, Vickers 1976), and rationalization (Abell 1991, Boudon 1994, Foucault 1965, Harsanyi 1977, Rubinstein 1998).

Consumption is another area of social inquiry which seems to have proven fruitful and is, no doubt, relevant to the study of gambling, as the desire to consume is one of the aspects of human behavior on which gambling plays. Social inquiries have been made on the subjects of general

consumption (Mackay 1997, Pearce 1997), the social meanings of money (Barnet 1996, Graeber 1996, Manning 1983, Mauss 1967, Needleman 1991, Zelizer 1997), clothing in contemporary societies (Cunningham 1993), the social meanings inherent in food consumption (Boszormenyi 1983, Cavanagh 1985, Douglas 1983, Mennell et al 1993, Mintz 1996, Niehoff 1983, van Otterloo 1995, Schlanger 1990, Whitehead 1992), prostitution, the satisfaction of a different appetite (Allen 1971, Carmen and Moody 1985, Foucault 1990, Seabrook 1996), and lastly, luxury and excess, an appetite never satisfied (Frank 1999).

There are also studies of play within cultural and social contexts (Cherfas and Lewin 1980, Duncan 1998, Lonsdale 1993, Mergen 1986, Salter 1978, Schwartzman 1980, Sleet 1971, Stevens 1977) as well as studies in American popular culture (Collins et al 1986, Crane 1992, Hoover 1988, Hoover and Lundby 1997, Kaiser 1979, Mukerji 1991, Nelson 1976, Ross 1989, Ross 1994, Rowe 1995, Stevenson 1995).

Magic (Garrett 1989, Hirst 1983, Evans-Pritchard 1976) is another feature associated with Las Vegas and American gambling culture which merits exploration and explanation, as well as contemporaneous occurrences of rituals (Brown 1980), and icons, contemporary (Betsky 1997, Paglia 1992), historic or classical (Schele and Miller 1985) and general image theory studies, including cinematic and other

technological media (Bransen 1991, Denzin 1991, May 1992, Mcquire 1997, Smith 1992), as well as studies regarding symbols (Cirlot 1962, Fontana 1994, Turner 1967, Turner 1992); all these are relevant to images associated with gambling.

This subject area marks the transition from the first category mentioned in the opening paragraph, to the second category of responses, representations and social constructions relating to gambling. First, gambling and film (Smith 1987). There are many films, television shows, works of art, sound recordings and video games which have gambling as a central theme and it is not my intention to find and review all of them; however, this being a review of the literature, it is literature as related in some way to gambling and its many facets which shall, in small part, be cited here (Allen 1992, Codrescu 1996, Dostoevski 1964, Francis and Welcome 1969, Kranes 1995, Lulofs 1990, Manley 1998, Miles 1985, Patrick 1993, Robertson 1989, Sharpe 1995, Thompson 1989, Sullivan 1990, Ventura 1997, Wakoski 1985, Wakoski 1995). There are also works of literary criticism of culture (Kavanagh 1994, Marcus and Fischer 1986, Pilkington 1973). In some literature, gambling and gaming are used indirectly. For example Lewis Carroll's Alice series which has been reprinted many times over the past hundred plus years with the inclusion of many different



illustrations of the Red Queen, the room which is really a chess board, and so forth (Carroll 1865). Some of the richest sources for the social meanings embedded in the symbols associated with gambling seem to be found in literature, film, and art.

The literature is strongest in areas of economic impact, moral implications, statistical studies and fictions about gambling. It appears to be deficient in representing studies of issue involving identity, religiosity, and cosmology as related to gambling in the casino milieu.

## CHAPTER 4

### RELIGION

Placing Luhrmann aside for the moment, the purpose of these next few pages is to explore some anthropological ideas about religion and if there similarities with ideas about Las Vegas, casinos, and gambling. Las Vegas is indeed full of religious-like activity. It has a reputation of being a Mecca of tourism and gambling where everyone is expected to visit once in their lifetime. The casinos' use symbolism, space, color, and a lexicon of loaded terms which are tangential to those used to explain, think about, or engage in activity which fall under the understanding of what is religious as asserted in this thesis. Burke's view that "religion consists above all in action. Although the action usually arises out of theoretical presuppositions, religions are not in the first instance theoretical undertakings, but aim to accomplish something. To be religious means above all to do certain kinds of things, not merely to think about them" (1996:5). Wallace writes that for anthropologists religion is "simply a kind of human behavior: specifically that kind of behavior which can be

classified as belief and ritual concerned with supernatural beings, powers, and forces" (1966:5).

I am not talking about the use of 'religion' as to do something religiously without meaning, such as brushing one's teeth every morning, this is not the type of religious activity I am asserting exists within casino walls, nor is it what these theoreticians mean. The result of a religious ritual, (or symbol or word) needs to have some import beyond the practical. I am talking about behavior and objects which work towards creating a world view, a way of thinking about and dealing with the universe, a cosmology. For gamblers it is indeed informal and unwritten, but I hope to demonstrate here that gamblers may well be engaging in ritual, speaking in a lexicon, conceptualizing space, and behaving in a manner which is all aimed at a type of cosmological engagement. In the following sections on magic, charms and jinxes, ritual, trances and hypnotism, and divination I hope to demonstrate this point.

According to Geertz "the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them" (1966:40). This importance can likewise be applied to peoples experiences in Las Vegas as I hope the following quote from

the novel Mustang Sally will elucidate as well as giving a concrete example of what I mean by cosmological engagement.

I say "have a good night" because I believe that it is very bad luck to use the expression which is the opposite of "lose"--that is, the W word--speculatively.

[...] I have reactivated all my favorite superstitions, and of course I am wearing my lucky herringbone jacket, with one of the nonfunctional cuff buttons gone.

I don't really believe in any of this stuff, of course, but what I do believe is that on a Vegas trip, everything effects everything else. See a penny, pick it up, change the world--walk in the front door of the Riviera one second later, one second earlier, and the world is transformed. You will get to the crap table you wanted to get to a few seconds later then you would have. Out of the corner of his eye, the shooter will see you take our place along the railing, and the gravity you have added to the gravity of all the other planetary crapshooters will pull the shot off-line, perhaps by only an angstrom [...], and he will make the point he was shooting for or he will "seven out" and lose. A man who would have left the table this throw will stay, a man playing the "Don't" who would have stayed will give up and play blackjack, and the blackjack table he sits down at will be forever changed. A Chinese man will leave that blackjack table, and go cruising between the rows roulette wheels and crap tables, and settle at whatever table he would not otherwise have ended up at. See a penny, pick it up. Or don't. Either way, the world is fragile, the line between one big result and another big result is thinner then a membrane.

(Allen 1992:17-19)

One could take a more abstract look at Las Vegas and come away with the idea that millions of people a month come here to bring offerings to the Lady Luck hoping that she will favor them. They offer billions of dollars to her every year knowing the money will go to building and beautifying

her temples. They give their offerings in exchange for a spin at the Wheel of Fortune, they queue up in long lines beneath large, brightly lit signs which say "Redemption", all this occurring under the watchful gaze of the Eye-in-the-Ski who makes sure they behave correctly, while simultaneously protecting them and keeping them safe<sup>3</sup>. The Eye-in-the-Sky is helped by a myriad of cheaters who have been caught, confessed their crimes and, having been forgiven, rise to the lofty heights of casino ceilings, floating, unseen, above the hordes of worshipers. As these people continue to make their donations they are further rewarded by shift in energy ranging from a party that never stops to a deep trance-like state so satisfying that they will continue to contribute until they are spent, both literally and figuratively.

As Luhrmann's witches engage in witchcraft activities in order to be mentally and emotionally transported back to a time when the world was new and magical, so too are gamblers in Las Vegas. Even the slots players I interviewed for this

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<sup>3</sup>One slots player said she likes that she is watched by the casino. She said that being watched all the time while inside a casino made her feel safe. She does not have to worry about her property if she is distracted. She doesn't have to worry about her things. Children are also supposed to be watched over. Perhaps this is where this woman's sense of safety comes from. However, another woman quoted earlier said specifically that she disliked being watched by the eye-in-the-sky.

thesis who played for money or for contest expressed that they in some way and at some point delved into the supernatural or called upon some extraneous forces for luck or become somehow engaged in a psychic state where they were able to predict a win.

This type of highly individualized religious activity which has no written rules except those dictated by the casino and enforced by the Eye-in-the-Sky, is a way gamblers can achieve the same results as Luhrmann's witches, an enchantment.

### Magic

Las Vegas is a magical place. An article about helping children cope with death from the February 15, 2000 issue of Family Circle magazine refers to "The Power of Magical Thinking: Magical thinking refers to unrealistic reasoning processes that all youngsters use from time to time to explain and make sense of death or another loss". In later sections I shall look at the ways people harness magic in order to enhance their luck and explain their losses, but in this chapter I shall examine the prevalence of magic shows in Las Vegas and how this magic enchants adulthood, possibly making sense of the loss experienced by gamblers. Luhrmann writes that "magic is about turning a let's-pretend fantasy of being a witch or wizard into a serious assertion about

the world. Magical practice is understood to be different from the everyday: the task of the magical practice is to make that different engagement seem persuasively real" (1989:327)<sup>4</sup>.

One of the most prevalent features of Las Vegas is the frequency of magic shows. Many times these shows are exclusively for adults. The Les Trix show at the San Remo featuring the "Showgirls of Magic" has pictures of scantily clad women in black lace stockings and black garter belts. The box office told me that children could go to the 8:00 PM show, but that the 10:30 PM show was topless and that no one under 18 was allowed.

Clearly this is an example of adults and only adults engaging in activities traditionally intended for children. Magic shows normally occur within the context of birthday parties or circuses. It would be considered outside of behavioral norms for adults to have a magic show where children are specifically excluded or for an adult to go without a child, unless they were there for a reason other than to be entertained. But within the context of Las Vegas adults attending magic shows without escorting children becomes the adult behavioral norm. Excluding children also

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<sup>4</sup>I shall assume she is referring to the Western world, since magic is part of the everyday life of peoples like the Azande, even after conversion to Catholicism as demonstrated in the 1982 film *Witchcraft among the Azande*.

completely frees the adult patron of one of the most pressing responsibilities of adulthood: parenting. Without the constraints and obligations of parenting there are fewer obstructions to engaging fully in a fantasy world of illusion and eroticism. The adult is free to engage in fantasy without the distractions of obligations and constraints of adult life.

But the magic itself and a belief that the magic goes beyond mere entertainment.

I understand this talk of imagery, fantasy and acting by one's guts through the model of play, that for many magicians, magic, and believing in magic, is analogous to a sort of play, and that the involvement in magic retains the ambiguity of the play world while also allowing for it to be understood as serious (Luhrmann 1989:331).

It doesn't matter if the witchcraft works or not or if magic works or not. One will willingly suspend one's disbelief because, as one Wiccan I know put it, it just makes her life fuller. The magic really is part of the fantasy and does have the effect of transforming, in a very real way, the worldview of those who choose to believe in it. Perhaps these real consequences are best stated by Luhrmann:

Magicians themselves freely draw the comparison between magician and child. This is a period of imaginative creativity and play, of exploration and self-discovery. Magicians repeatedly described themselves as having a 'child-like wonder' at the



world, a continual surprise at the diversity of nature, and they talk about the need for and value of playful fantasy. [...] In the coven, in the study groups and trips to the stone circles, people often mentioned their need to be childlike, to marvel at nature and to re-experience an imaginative intensity they had lost. Magic is meant to release the child within and return us to the gentle humour of being human (1989:103).

Here is a lengthy but interesting quote from Carroll about magic throughout a mythical time line which perhaps might illustrate this concept further. Although Carroll is explaining a type of historically imagined time, this time line could be a metaphor of a personal history, suggesting that there was a time when people were young and believed that all sorts of magical behavior was really possible.

During the Golden Age all men were magicians. Magic came naturally and miracles were everyday affairs. Men could move stones with their thoughts as easily as with their hands. They could communicate psychically without any problem, and speech was invented only later when telepathy began to wane. Magic, in other words, was originally the birthright of the human race, but of a human race free from the crimes of the later ages.

Then when the Golden Age declined the world declined with it. Not only humanity but the actual physical environment became less perfect, less ethereal and sensitive to psychic forces. Man's magic abilities sank deep into his unconscious and ceased to be part of his everyday mentality. The practice of magic became more difficult; men no longer received occult powers naturally but had to work to achieve them. Finally in the Iron Age magic could be mastered only by a small minority, and these men became the medicine men and wizards of the world.

[...] Ten thousand years ago, a thousand years ago, even during the middle ages, men were better equipped to delve the great secrets, and at the same time the climate of the age was more friendly to their attempts. As time passed this climate worsened, and with the

coming of technology its degeneration was accelerated to dizzy speeds.

So in our day genuine magic is a rarity, especially in modern society. One who aspires to become a magician is faced with a double disadvantage: the world has lost much of its receptivity to psychic influences, says the believer; and the faculties in man that respond to these influences have atrophied as well (Carroll 1974:11-12).

Here we see that magic within the context of Las Vegas has two separate yet integral effects. The first is to free up and entertain the adult by creating a safe space within which they are allowed to indulge in fantasy and imagination without violating social norms. And the second being the ability that engaging and believing in magical activity as having the effect whether directly or epiphenomenally, of creating an enchanted worldview, blurring the lines between reality and imagination in a way that is aesthetically pleasing to the believer. Luhrmann writes regarding witches that "when one asks how they got involved in magic, many of them begin their account with childhood novels and fantasies of playing Artemis and Apollo in Central Park. Magic seems to have deepened their involvement with that imaginative encounter" (1989:328).

#### Charms and Jinxes

There exists among many gamblers an informal yet sometime strictly adhered to code of conduct involving objects, space, language, and orientation which can either pollute,

obstruct, or enhance one's productive engagement with whatever universal forces control luck. Dickerson writes that "up to 60 per cent of regular players express the belief that the way they play the machine can influence their likelihood of winning " (1996:158).

A slots and table games player told me that his wife was a jinx and that when he is in Las Vegas he cannot make love to his wife. He cannot even kiss her. Several people have reported women as being bringers of luck, both good and bad. Writing on gambling in Greece, Malaby says that:

Luck (both good and bad) can be, variously, inherent in an individual, brought by a friend, identified with an item or place or time, divinely bestowed, or associated with sexual purity. Its efficacy or existence may also simply be denied. Statistical probability, skill, and fate are other parts of this constellation of tropes of indeterminacy which often emerge in gambling and other risk-laden situations. It is the complexity and contingent nature of such concepts, and how through their use local actors both construct and situate themselves within momentarily structured patterns of outcomes (1997:19).

Another slots player said if he is at a machine and he is winning and the person next to him leaves, he will change the way he bets until someone comes and sits in the same seat, or he will stop playing and cash out. On two occasions I observed people at casinos with between five and ten different colored rabbit's feet attached to their belt. Regrettably I was unable to interview them but perhaps the

idea of these items having luck through a type of sympathetic magic is because the object was obtained through a type of sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice to change one's luck certainly goes back thousands of years as does the idea that the dead have special magical properties.

Some people can be observed physically tensing up when someone sits next to them. One woman who was clearly on a winning streak at a Wheel of Fortune quarter machine was chatting with me and then when she began to lose consistently, she refused to talk to me. She would not acknowledge that I was talking to her and not respond, refusing to make even eye contact. Instead she clenched her jaw and stuck out her chin. She completely transformed from someone who was gregarious and casual to someone who was grim and antisocial. She had imagined me as the cause of her bad luck and hoped that by ceasing to acknowledge me her good luck would return.

Other slots players claim that the player himself is the source of his own good or bad luck. One told me that mood effects whether a player will win or not. "If you're in a bad mood you won't win. If you're in a good mood you will." A local slots player told me that she had been losing lately because her attitude has been all wrong. She used to play with \$500 to \$1000 dollars in her pocket and that effected her attitude. Since moving to Las Vegas from Los Angeles

she can only afford to go to a casino with \$20 in her pocket, negatively effecting her attitude and therefore causing her to lose. Her attitude is worsened by the knowledge that the money being wagered should be "going somewhere else". When I asked her what she meant she told me that her bills were paid but that she should be using that twenty on groceries or clothes.

One man said he believed that luck can be controlled, but that someone with the ability to control it would not care about money, so they wouldn't be in Las Vegas gambling. When I asked him why, he explained that it was not because this person had a lot of money, but that life will provide for them and that money is not their concern.

I observed another slots player at the Hard Rock Casino doing the following: A woman was gambling at a slot machine. There was a cup placed upside down over the machine's handle and she was using the button to place her bets. After a few minutes she reached for the cup started to take it off, but changed her mind and decided not to. She did this without taking her eyes off the reels. She continued gambling with the cup in place. When asked why the cup was positioned thus she replied that it was a signal that the machine was in use and that she had placed it there to go get money changed, but since she was winning, she decided to leave it where it was.

Here we see evidenced that people in Las Vegas engage in behaviors of avoidance of pollution and a belief in magic charms. Certainly this is not true of all the people I interviewed, but it is true for a significant number.

### Ritual

Ritual, as repeated actions to effect outcome can be observed everywhere throughout any gambling establishment. Gambling itself is a repetition of actions with purpose of the outcomes of win, lose or draw. Las Vegas tends to enhance this repetition, particularly with slot machines. When there is a win the number of credits or coins, whichever the player chooses to get, is counted off by a series of electronic 'bings'. When the reels spin usually a little melody is played. Often when I have walked through Sunset Station casino the noise level is much greater than the actual number of players. The volume of the machines seems to be much louder in this casino.

Some machines get rather fancy and have additional games within games. For example, in addition to regular play, a player can get an opportunity to spin an extra set of reels, advance a game piece, fill up a piggy bank, spin a wheel, and so forth.

Gmelch writes that "magic is a human attempt to impose order and certainty on an otherwise uncertain situation.

The attempt is irrational in that there is no causal connection between the rituals and the instruments of magic and the desired effect" (1999:192). Athletes, along with any other folks who partake in risky activity, have always had rituals, or repeated action with non-tangible results, in which they feel they must engage in before or during play without having any particular reason behind it except that the last time they made *this* particular gesture or wore *that* particular pair of socks, they won.

Gamblers can often be observed engaging in ritual activity as they play. I observed one person who would blow on the machine as she slapped the "maximum bet" button. Some will switch between smacking or pressing the button and pulling the handle. Others alter the amount they bet according to a pattern, shadowing the machine. "It is as if the player 'shadows' the machine events, playing in tune with the machine" (Dickerson 1996:160).

In Homo Ludens, Huizinga writes about the relationship between play, ritual, and religion in. He says that "in the form and function of play, itself an independent entity which is senseless and irrational, man's consciousness that he is embedded in a sacred order of things finds its first, highest and holiest expression. Gradually the significance of a sacred act permeates the playing. Ritual grafts itself

upon it; but the primary thing is and remains play" (1950:17-18).

Some acts that people occasionally indulge in are religious in their origins, as is probably the case with throwing salt over ones left shoulder after spilling it, but they have long since lost their original symbolic translations. These rituals, however, do remain and persist and are an integral part of Las Vegas which is protected and enhanced by casinos and engaged in by virtually all gamblers.

#### Altered States of Consciousness

Another similarity between Luhrmann's witches and Las Vegas gamblers is the importance of altered states of consciousness in their experiences. Informants report that they become freer, less inhibited, more able to socialize, a state of mind which is no doubt enhanced by the free alcohol provided to gamblers by the casino. A significant number of the slots players who prefer video poker machines over reels report the games having a meditative effect which they liken unto a trance.

Regarding meditation Luhrmann writes:

'Meditation' is a word generally used to identify certain sorts of relaxation techniques which involve mental concentration. It does not really matter *what* one concentrates upon: it is the act of concentration,



over a long period, which produces the desired results. Concentration techniques are widespread throughout very different cultures. Zen and Theravada Buddhism, Islamic Sufism, Bhakti yoga, Judaic Kabbalism, Christian Hesychasm – all these involve the same basic technique of single-minded awareness, [foot note omitted] and all produce the same effect: feelings and awareness recognized as spiritual, divine, or religious. There is a technology of the sacred, and it is accessible without dogma, doctrine or drugs.

There is also little doubt that meditation produces physiological effects, although it is not clear whether the physiology differs from the general physiological effects of relaxation. Beginners experience a lower metabolic rate, decreases in heart and respiratory rates, a lower blood lactate level (tension related), higher skin resistance. The more advanced meditator may exhibit a greater number of slow alpha brain waves, followed by their inhibition and the increase of theta waves. Some researchers have described this as a 'wakeful, hypometabolic state' [citation omitted]. Some scientific inquiry has also suggested that the likelihood of apparently 'psychic' activity. (Luhrmann 1989:183-184).

One video poker player reported that she liked playing video poker because it was like going into a trance or a meditative state. Another described the experience the experience of playing as like having an absence of self, that he has no self awareness. Another player talks about getting "Poker Eye", a state where she becomes so deeply entranced she unwittingly throws away winning hands. Another reports that when she sits down at a slot machine and starts playing, she does not think about anything. She describes her experience as soothing, like therapy, because it clears her mind. She says because of this she can play

for hours and hours. "It's great to hit, although its not about money, the money's good and I could use it, but it's about hitting".

Hypnotists are a group of performers who have been traditionally associated with Las Vegas. The number of hypnotists show has been dropping over the past few years, but I believe this is the result of hypnotists being able to make more money with their hypnotic skills elsewhere rather than a wane in popularity. But about five hypnotists a year headline in Vegas and they usually fill the house, especially if they are good.

#### Divining

Another transformation of self reported by slots player which is similar to religious activity is the act of divining machines. Most of the people I spoke to said that at one point or another they were able to tell if or when a machine was going to hit and they were right. Several said that they or others could tell by looking at a machine whether or not it was ripe<sup>5</sup> to hit.

Here is something I wrote on September 2, 1999 while watching a woman at The Sahara Hotel and Casino. A woman

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<sup>5</sup>I believe the prevalence of the use of fruits as symbols on reel-type slot machines has to do with the association or transference of the concept of "ripeness" from the fruits to the machine.

walks through a casino holding a bucket of quarters. She wanders among the slot machines, slowly pacing back and forth. Her eyes dart from machine to machine. She will step up to a machine apparently trying to sense something. She acts like an animal trying to sniff out and sense who has been here before. She will get close to some machines and linger by them for a moment, while passing by others after only a glance. One would think she is drawing on some great knowledge or deep inner power. She is like an ordinary person transformed to a diviner. She is in a state of deep engagement with some force that will guide her to the winning machine.

One slots player reported that he can tell if a machine is going to hit by watching the 'sevens' and the 'bars'. Another reported having an experiences where she said a number would hit and it did. This began a series of similar experience that endured for the course of an evening. She wound up making a lot of money.

Perhaps Dickerson can shed some light on these ideas:

Players' beliefs that they can predict when a machine will pay out are similar but best categorized under the illusion of control (Langer 1975). This illusion is concerned with the belief that chance-determined events are somehow under the control of the player. Thus a typical frequent player will have a favorite machine (that is, one they believe is more likely to pay out to them), will believe that the manner in which they play the machine will influence their chances of winning (for example, playing to a

steady rhythm, playing out all credits before putting in more cash and a whole range of what are best described as superstitious behaviors) and, finally, will claim to be able to tell when a machine is about to pay out. Our observations have produced a few instances of how a sudden increase in the player's estimate of the likelihood of the machine paying out is in fact followed by a large win. Even to experience this on a single occasion may have a strong impact on the extent to which the player believes in the illusion. (1996:161).

People are immersed in a religiosity which transforms them and their relationship to the forces of universe. In the next section I shall look at the profane ways in which people experience transformation. This transformation can be personal or experienced indirectly through the transformation of someone else in order to create an illusion which mentally transports the audience back to an earlier time, when they were young, and free, and the world was enchanted.

## CHAPTER 5

### TRANSFORMATION

"Gambling does make kings but stupid kings."

A former Keno runner, February 10, 1999.

Transformations occur throughout Las Vegas. The city itself has transformation as a key feature. People frequently ask me what new hotels are opening or what's been blown up lately. Las Vegas is in a constant state of flux as it continues to re-invent itself. Its visitors and residents are likewise transformed. Levi-Strauss writes that "doubtless gambling provides, in modern society, the most striking picture of [the] transfers of wealth with the sole purpose of gaining prestige. Gambling really requires a special study by itself, but here we shall confine ourselves to a brief statement" (1969:56).

Because of Las Vegas' completely immersive effect people lose their sense of time and place, and along with it a certain amount of perspective. The most common analogy used by my informants is that Las Vegas is like a Disneyland for

adults. When they first experienced Las Vegas they have a sense of awe and wonder. One person said its like a kid with a chocolate bar. They can't wait to experience it. Here we find more similarities with Luhrmann's witches. "Witches, as one says, 'have never lost the simple wonder and curiosity of small children'" (Luhrmann 1989:103).

An ad for the Circus Circus casino shows a character associated with children, a clown, holding items exclusively associated with adults, a cigar and a martini, thus blurring the lines between childhood imaginings and exclusively adult behavior.

In the previous chapter people were transformed into a world where magic was everywhere, some became diviners able to predict "hot" machines, and through the manipulation of luck people imagined themselves as having a powerful and effective place in the universe. In this section I will further test if Luhrmann's theory holds true to slots players in Las Vegas by looking at the reason people give for gambling, their engagement in activities geared towards fantasy and roleplaying, the prevalence of theme-related activity, and, as our childlike enchantment begins to grow into adolescence, ideas about rebellion.

### Adults at Play

The slots players I interviewed for this thesis could easily be divided into three groups. One group reports that they play for sensory rewards. This group is comprised of an overwhelming majority of my informants who are mostly tourists who play to hear and see certain things happen. They report that they play to have fun or to be detracted from everyday life. The next group plays for the challenge. They are competitive folks who play specifically to report winning as their primary goal. Most of the people in this category preferred table games to slots and are only discussed briefly. I include them because they are after the excitement of winning and the "action" generated by wagering money (as opposed to the money itself). The third group, which thus far is comprised of locals, are folks who actually believe they can make money by playing slots despite knowing that the odds are against them and although sometimes they play for pleasure, mostly they play for economic gain, or at least that is what they hope.

None of my informants said they played for money, even

when asked directly<sup>6</sup>. Most people stated that it was specifically not the money, but rather completely different reasons why they played. These reasons for playing included the thrill of hitting, fun derived from being challenged, and sensory experiences like hearing the money hit the tin pan or seeing the lights flash and sounds a machine makes when it hits.

Some people reported they liked playing because it distracted them and changed their mental state. Others said that the money's not important, what's important is that you had a good time. Most of the tourists interviewed reported that they came to Vegas<sup>7</sup> expecting to lose money. One person stated directly that he liked to win only because it enabled

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<sup>6</sup>The only people who stated that they played for money were colleagues who did so only after I informed them that in all my interviews and conversations thus far no one said they played for money, even when asked directly. Their opinions are coming from a bias and do not contradict the opinions of my unbiased informants. Furthermore, one informant plays slots in Vegas as well as owning four slot machines, three video poker and one reel-type. All authentic and set to what she refers to as "Vegas odds", however they have a key in them all the time and whenever she needs money to play she simply takes it out of the machine. There also exists several web sites which offer "gambling" on Vegas-style games with credits which have no inherent value except for playing at the specific site.

<sup>7</sup>A vernacular way of referring to Las Vegas used frequently by gamblers and people in the casino industry is by using the shortened "Vegas". This may sound awkward to speakers of Spanish since it is grammatically wrong, however the people I have interviewed for this thesis use the term "Vegas" instead of Las Vegas with such frequency that I have deemed it proper to do so in this paper as well. All the people I interviewed who refer to Las Vegas as "Vegas" are native English speakers.



him to play longer. These types of responses came across class boundaries.

As stated earlier, many people played because they liked the sensory payback. Like children, they seem to be after rewards of music or lights which respond in a appealing manner a win. One person said she liked to play the type of machine where some of the bars contain a diamond symbol which will move the bars up or down one level to the pay line. Another slots player interviewed reported that she likes the lights, while another plays because they "like to hear that money fall." Another likes to play for all the bells and whistles, the trinkets, and the good atmosphere of casinos.

Here people are reporting sensory stimulation as the primary pleasure derived from gambling. Regarding the relationship between betting games and playing for fun Turner writes that:

Huizinga is also surely wrong when he sees play as divest of all material interest. He forgets the important role of betting and games of chance in, for example, gambling houses, casinos, race tracks and lotteries. These may have important economic effects, even though playing for money remains completely unproductive, since the sum of the winnings at best only equals the losses of other players, and the entrepreneur, the bank, is the only ultimate winner; ironically he is perhaps the only one who takes no pleasure in gambling (1986:125).

Our gamblers in the first two groups are indeed not playing for money, but are playing for pleasure. Including pleasure derived simply from winning. A woman from the challenge group reported that she loves to win but it's not the money, it's the challenge. She likes to play for fun derived from setting a budget and sticking to it. This player is motivated by contest. She sets her own rules and she does not break them. Her reward is not in the sound of coins clanging into a metal pan, but in winning according to the rules. Her enjoyment is derived from what she perceives as the seriousness of contest. When asked why she likes to win, another woman told me that "it makes you feel great, like you're special". She said she was once told which machine was hot and when she played it and won repeatedly she felt great, like she had the inside track.

A different opinion might be that all these people are playing for economic gain and that they are masking their greed by talking about money strictly in metaphoric terms. I refute this however and assert that within the context of Las Vegas, greed is considered a personal asset. The only entity for which the blatant aspect of greed is taboo is the casino itself. This can be clearly evidenced by the amount of effort by casinos put into creating the appearance and emulation of magnanimity and altruism. However, even the people who gamble in Vegas to make a buck also report that

they play for some other reason than money. I must note here that the only person who told me they played for money and for no other reason plays video poker for the minimum bet. I remain unconvinced that anyone who would play for the minimum bet is truly playing for money, (unless they only had one nickel to their name), since hitting a jackpot under these circumstances would amount to the loss of hundreds to thousands of dollars in winnings. Since they are guaranteeing that they will not win a jackpot, even if they hit it, then they are indeed, not playing to win money, but are, rather, playing to lose. So, just as Luhrmann's witches practice magic to enchant their experiences of adulthood as well as to effect an outcome, slot players in Las Vegas appear to be likewise engaged.

### Fantasy and Role Playing

Another way Las Vegas gamblers experience transformation is through fantasy and role playing. In this section I shall elaborate on how these experiences are achieved through association with the icons present in Las Vegas, encounters with masks and disguises, those moments when a gambler fantasizes themselves as a big winner, and the very ethos of Las Vegas itself.

A Keno Runner I interviewed summed up gambling in Las Vegas nicely: "Gambling does make kings but stupid kings,

they throw their money right back". In his thesis on gambling in Greece, Malaby writes that:

What is at stake over the gambling table is not solely the money on the table and the social status of the participants: reality itself is up for grabs (along with the players' places in it), shaped amidst the structures and conventions of the games, the unfolding of shifting outcomes, and in terms of chance, luck, skill, and fate – tropes that implicate not simply the bounded chance of the cards and dice, but also the local social world of the participants" (1997:24).

Role playing and fantasy can be, according to Luhmann:

The state of becoming the gods, or interacting with the gods, in which pretense passes the threshold into vivid reality, the 'really real'. One knows that the masks and bull-roarers are only make-believe; and yet one is frightened of these impersonated ghosts, finds them awe-full, experiences ecstasy. 'The disguised or masked individual "plays" another part, another being. He is another being. The terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe are all inextricably entangled in this strange business of masks and disguises, [...] the intense absorption into the fantasy realm which becomes a sacred reality. (1989:333-334).

A prominent symbol in Las Vegas which is directly relating to role-playing is the mask. Elizabeth Tonkin suggests that the purpose of a mask is "to change, replace, or obliterate a face by a mask [which] signals at the least a change of identity. At the most, this real transformation of appearance is identified with a transformation of essence" (1992:266). Masks appear in specific promotions for non-mask themed casinos and three of the major Las Vegas

casinos are specifically mask-themed, The Rio, Harrah's, and The Orleans.

Another point of transformative fantasy in Las Vegas is its association with the archetypes of the American cultural imagination. To the right is a photograph of a bust of a famous poker player turned casino owner, Sam Boyd. Many people have waxed on nostalgically about the old Las Vegas. There is bust of Bugsie Siegel in the Flamingo and there are gambling museums. Las Vegas seems to be the last place where the ethos of the wild American West can still be sniffed out. Here Smith writes a bit on mythic archetypes and gamblers:

What may not be so obvious is the fact that the culture of gambling has changed. With the increasing popularity of state-sanctioned lotteries and their mega-jackpot appeal, and the increasing reliance on the technology of coin-operated gaming devices by the sanitized, corporate-controlled casino industry (and today by state lotteries as well), the mythic archetype of a rugged individualist gambler – whether card shark, pool hustler or horse-player – involved in a specific ritual of play is an endangered species, likely to become a thing of the past. Such players, whether found in real life or in legend, have assumed a larger-than-life stature. They have mastered or defied the odds against them; they have challenged their opponents and the vagaries of chance. In so doing, they have mirrored the risk-taking characteristic of an evolving nation, culture and economy even though they may have been acting outside the traditional boundaries of socially admired behavior (1996:101).

Las Vegas can also be used internationally to define identities as an embodiment of western cosmopolitanism,

something worth boasting about. Malaby talks about a hybrid of international cosmopolitanism and the mystique associated with gambling.

Mirrored in gambling's ambiguous position in the eyes of many Chaniots as both a sanctioned and stylish activity of the 'West' and as a secretive and seamy activity of the 'East'. Other forms of gambling are also morally ambiguous, invoked, like backgammon, to imply both a seedy preoccupation and a cosmopolitan knowledge. One dice player insisted to me that he would never have learned to be a gambler if he had not gone to the United States, where, he said, "I went to Atlantic City two or three times a week, and to Las Vegas at least once or twice a month. There, I learned everything about gambling." In particular, Chaniots associate poker and card-playing with a European image of gambling, most evident in references to James Bond and to the similarity between playing card games in coffeehouses and in casinos. On many occasions I was asked how poker is played in the United States, and Pedros [...] said that he learned how to gamble while serving on merchant ships, traveling most often to the coast of the United States, where he played in local card games near the docks (Malaby 1997:108).

Another type of transformation occurring in Las Vegas is generated by impersonators of all types. Of the 108 shows advertised in the November 1999 issue of "Today in Las Vegas" where the average number of advertisements per category was 7.2, 13 were for impersonators, 2 were for recreations, and 6 were for tributes to famous bands, musical genres, and music from specific time periods from the past (see Table 1). It would take some effort to visit Las Vegas for a weekend and not have some type of encounter with the image of Elvis Presley.

Throughout Las Vegas T-Shirts, license plates, and other markers of identity can be found. These markers go beyond simple announcing that its wearer had visited a place but say "Slot Player" or "Gambler". A table game player told me that when inside a casino people take on a new identity and that there is an unspoken understanding of equality between the players. Issues of race, religion, class, politics, even individual personalities all cease to have any import. All that matters is that they are all here for one reason: to gamble, and that creates a special and immediate bond between them and with that comes a special form of respect and conduct, although I would guess that this conduct is heavily influenced by the rules, gaze and enforcement of the casino.

Sports and sports heroes are also part of Las Vegas iconography. Every casino has a sports book and The Las Vegas Club has baseball as its main theme. "Baseball fans today idolize Babe Ruth and would undoubtedly like to worship him in a niche if it could be done" (Blom 1932:500).

At the New York, New York casino one is in a sense able to do just that. There are two special slot machines where one can play for silver coins with different images of Babe Ruth. I assume the machine is still there, in Las Vegas' constant reinventing of itself, the machines may well have been pulled by the time this thesis is read. "Games are

occasions to display important personal character traits: courage, integrity, gallantry and composure. These virtues, too, are part of a mythic American heroic stereotype which is today reinforced by games and athletic contests" (Smith 1996:104).

Through masks, impersonators, and icons, gamblers in Las Vegas, like Luhrmann's witches, are attempting to create what Luhrmann calls the really-real. Adult imaginations can be fired up by rubbing shoulders with Elvis, dressing the part of the high-roller, or simply becoming nostalgic for the past. One slots player says that by being at his favorite casino, Binion's Horseshoe, he can get back to what it felt like to be young. He told me its like buying a Harley, like being free.



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Table 1    Entertainment ads from the November 11-17 issue of Today in Las Vegas by category.

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Types of Entertainment	Number of ads/listings
Magic Shows	7
Circuses	5
Impersonators	13
Amusement Rides	5
Comedy	9
Tributes/Oldies	11
Hypnotists	1
Recreations	2
Sex Shows	5
Productions/Reviews	15
Musicals	2
Lounge Acts	20
Concerts	11
Night Clubs	2

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Notes:

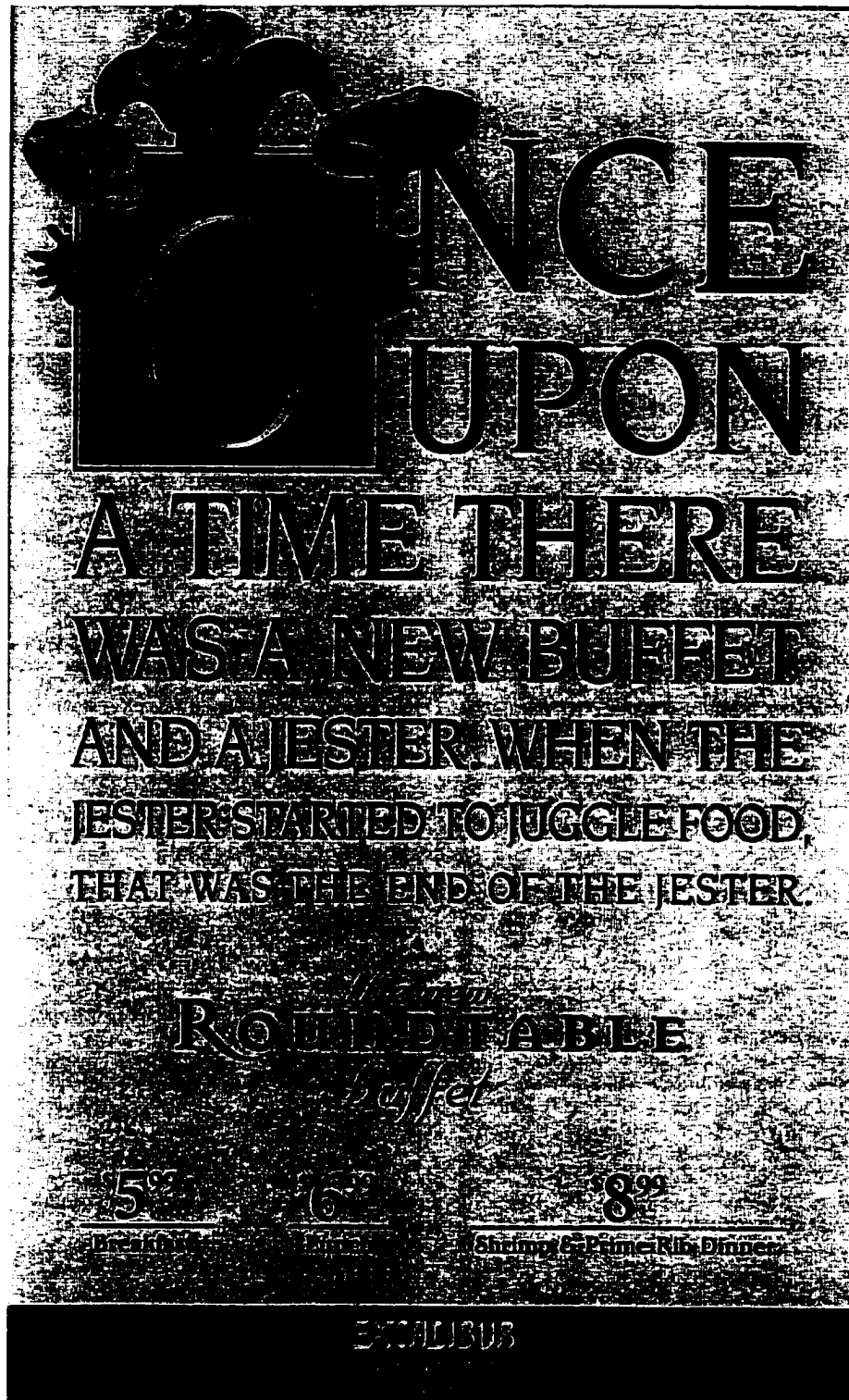
The average number of ads per category is 7.2. These ads do not include those designated for children, ads for shopping, museums, or collections.

### Theming

Theme parks seem to be place which people associate with childhood, especially thanks to Walt Disney's initiative. Although Luhrmann does not talk specifically about theme parks they have been a prominent feature of the landscape of childhood. This is certainly true for the past 30 years. Because many of my informants specifically drew parallels between theme parks and Las Vegas, and since Las Vegas itself has strived to enhance and emphasize its theming features, the subject of theming is well worth discussing as a return-to-childhood aspect of Las Vegas.

The Strip is a series of chapel-like microcosms of Paris, Vienna, New York, New York, Arabia, Asia, etc.. The non-gamblers I interviewed, and most of the gamblers as well, said they like the variety of things to see. Some described Las Vegas as being like Disneyland, or a playground for adults. One loves to walk the streets of Paris, then Venice and enjoys seeing the different displays. Another likes to look at the buildings, walk between them, look at the different designs. One likes to watch other people gamble. All the non-gamblers are very passive in their responses. Basically, they like to watch, while the awe-struck, feeling like they didn't have enough time to do

Theming is an important part of Las Vegas in creating the all immersive experience which allows for a loss of



ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A NEW BUFFET AND A JESTER. WHEN THE JESTER STARTED TO JUGGLE FOOD, THAT WAS THE END OF THE JESTER.

*The Round Table*  
Buffet

\$5	\$6	\$8
Breakfast	Lunch	Shrimp & Prime Rib Dinner

EXALISUR

Figure 2 Example of the use of theme in an advertisement.

sense of time and space. Being in Las Vegas becomes somewhat liminal, all of which become ultimately transformative, enabling the patron to have more real and uninterrupted fantasies. This is particularly true of casinos such as Circus Circus and Excalibur and their tremendous popularity. Here one can sit for hours gambling inside an incredibly noisy medieval castle. For the average person, this is about as far removed from everyday life as they are able to get.

### Rebellion

Witchcraft is rebellious against mainstream religion. In fact, at many points in history one could be quite severely punished, if not killed for having been caught or accused of partaking in witchcraft. Las Vegas gamblers appear to be likewise rebelling against the authority of social norms. One slot player I interviewed reported that she likes the lights and the fact that no one ever sleeps in Las Vegas. To stay up all night would be taboo for a child, since it would require that the child's guardian would have to stay up all night as well. Another break of taboo can be found at the inescapable Las Vegas casino buffets. One can eat only dessert and as much or as little as one wants.

One slots player who preferred video poker over slots described going to a casino and playing as being akin to

being bad. She goes there to smoke and drink as well as play, activity which she normally would not partake in at home. She describes it as getting back to being a rebellious teenage. She goes with a girlfriend or alone, but never with her husband, whom I gather has authority over her.

In discussing Greece, Malaby attempts to explain rebellion against hegemony in the following manner:

Resistance to structures of domination such as the state, and the conviction that one can 'get around' its demands [...] bring into relief the potential for doubt when confronting an explanatory system, be it that of the nation-state, or those of science and religion. This domain of cosmological indeterminacy comes most clearly into focus in the question of theodicy, when a belief system is taken to task for its inability to provide a moral justification either for desultory suffering or for good fortune falling on those deemed immoral. Thus, the question of theodicy lies, if you will, at the intersection between moral evaluation and chance, and brings the completeness of any cosmology into doubt (Malaby 1997:22).

In other words, through gambling one can try to best the powers that include the cosmos itself.

Smith also writes about rebellion:

Historically, the United States has had an ambivalent attitude towards gambling. On the one hand, gambling has been regarded as a sin, a vice, a crime and an unproductive waste of time. This attitude dates back to the time of earliest settlement, and persists among some Americans even

to this day. However, since the legalization of the first modern state lottery in New Hampshire in the early 1960s and at an accelerating pace in the past two decades, gambling has undergone a marked change in image. In fact, today gambling can be seen as harmless, recreational, charitable and even patriotic – particularly when it is in the context of playing state lotteries.

This change in image has profound implications for American culture. Not only does it reflect changes in cultural values that have already occurred, but it also works to change cultural values further. In many ways, gambling was 'better' when it was seen as 'bad'. Because it was a pariah enterprise of shady, glamour, it had an attraction to the marketplace and, more importantly, a separation from the normal events of everyday life that kept the activity in its place which, for most people, was the differentiated world of play. As it has become more integrated into everyday events, gambling has actually become less and, perhaps, even more insidious than any of the traditional negative images could portray. [...]

But it is among people who gamble where the 'rebellion' of gambling persists. Whether a game is legal or not, a player's decision to gamble still may be socially or morally suspect even though it is consistent with a cultural propensity for risk, particularly if the chosen game is not a legally sanctioned lottery. In the other more or less indigenous forms of gambling that have evolved in the United States, players test their mettle and become initiated into particular gambling subcultures: card games (poker, gin rummy and the like), casino play (blackjack, roulette, dice), *pare mutual* wagering (at the races or jai-alai fronton) or sports betting (in Nevada or most often with an illegal bookie) (Smith 1996: 101, 103).

Battle-born under illegal circumstances, Nevada has always existed on the margins of the law. Las Vegas repeatedly ignores federal law and is a magnet for

fugitives, criminals, folks looking for easy money, and others who choose to live on the margins of society.

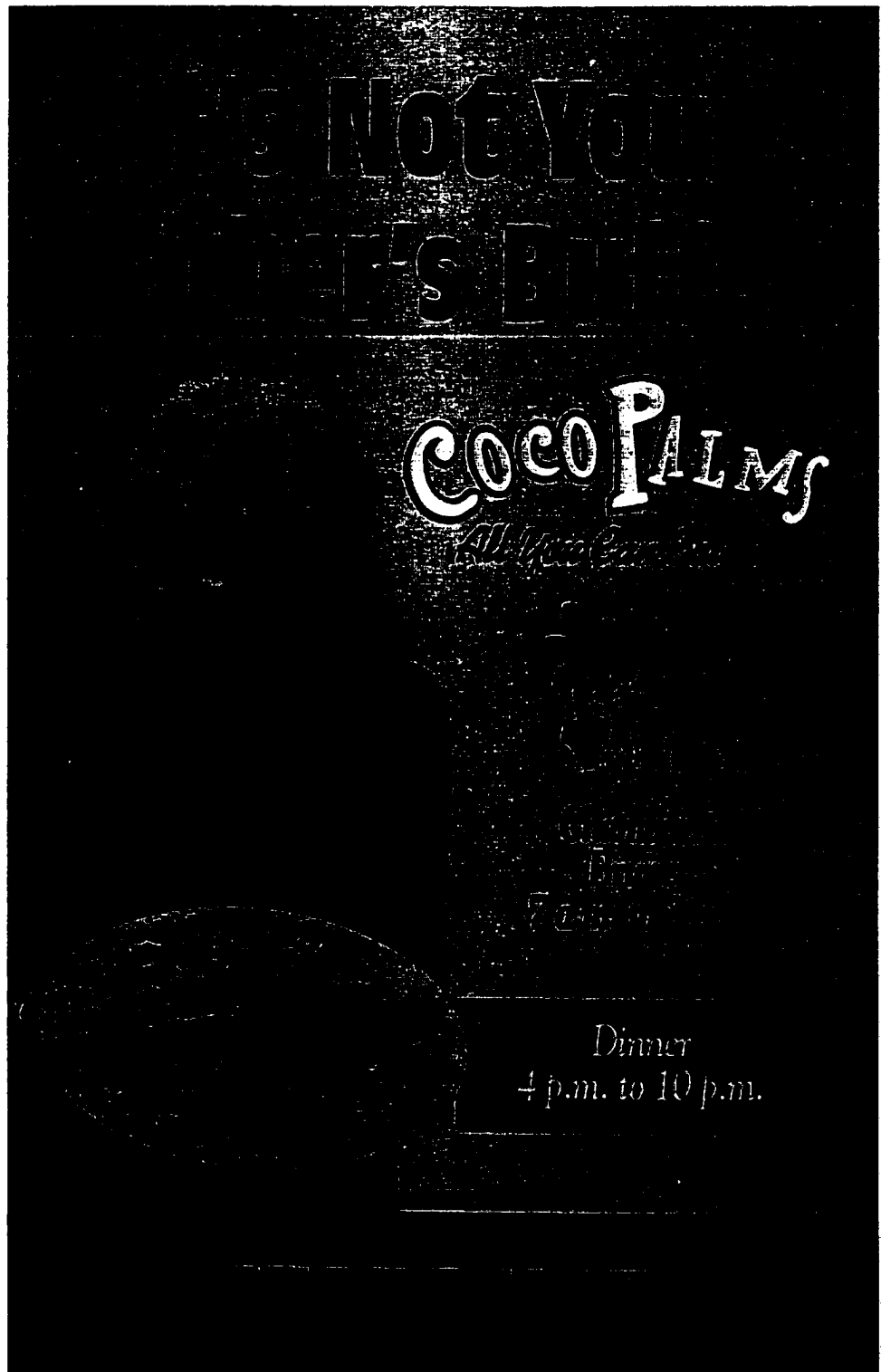


Figure 2 An example of rebellion in an advertisement.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

A slots player said: "You don't gain by winning, you gain by losing. You gain by looking around. It gets my mind off my job". Dickerson discusses how miners whose work is physically difficult and dangerous engage in gambling and use gambling's promise of a big win as a form of escape and distraction from the demands of their jobs (1996:152). Perhaps people are trying to cope with "the pervasive indeterminacies of experience" while trying to explain the seemingly unfair distribution of fortune in the world (Malaby 1997).

Magic makes ambiguous the line between fantasy and reality. Perhaps when reality is difficult or life has become stale, engagement in the make-believe world of Las Vegas imbues upon the ordinary an enchanted quality, as Luhrmann suggests. One informant told me that the best thing about Vegas was that it was such an overwhelming bombardment of the senses that he couldn't wait to get home and do ordinary things, like the dishes.

I believe that the existence and persistence of Las Vegas can be explained in part by its patrons' engagement, in one way or another, in activities which allowed for a child-like enchantment of adult life, in a similar manner as and for similar reasons as have Luhrmann's witches. Las Vegas gamblers use fantasy, role-playing, magic, charms and jinxes, ritual, divining, trance and hypnotism as well as an abandonment of the responsibilities of adult life in order to achieve this effect. Perhaps this is part of a cultural neoteny, where people are encouraged to retain juvenile features (emotionally and culturally, not necessarily physically) in order for us to more comfortably fit into a society which has moved us further and further away from our days as hunters and gatherers thanks to the machines and institutions which have become such overwhelming features of society.

Gambling appears to be universal and part of recorded history going back thousands of years. No one will know when the first two Hominids made the first bet. I personally dislike to gamble. Its popularity always puzzled me until I realized that perhaps something quite complex was occurring which needed to be studied and analyzed. In a casino, as is probably the case in any instance of confronting risk, cosmological notions are transposed and people report themselves as engaging in child-like beliefs

and behavior. In my more than two years of observation in and around Las Vegas casinos I have seen people partake in the Las Vegas phenomenon, actively and passively, from across the boundaries of culture, gender, religion, society, nation and generation.

Psychological studies can help us better understand the reasons behind the fact that although Las Vegas creates precious few people who have won enough to have life changing implications, people still play. The questions of why all but two of the people I have spoken to do not play for economic reasons but rather find 'hitting', seeing the lights flash, or hearing the coins clank against that metal pan, and so forth reward enough to play are not what this thesis is about. What is being explored here is that this culture form known as Las Vegas is growing and is now beginning to spread quickly with the advent of Indian gaming, the spread of state lotteries, and revival of river boat gaming.

Through my many travels I know that Las Vegas is well renowned globally. The ever increasing amount of money spent on gambling indicates that this phenomenon should be closely studied and understood in order to make sense of our increasingly global future. Anthropological inquiry into Las Vegas and casino style gambling should be applied in order to address the larger issues of humanity and culture.

Included among these should be issues of contemporary cosmologies, identity and belonging, reciprocity and exchange, and the globalization of local cultures.

Las Vegas is in no way a meaningless frill on the edge of society but an important indicator of who we are as a people and what our struggles and aspirations consist of. Here we can see how we think of the universe and ourselves within it by looking at our actions when faced with risk and the many consequences of these actions, both monetary and the intangible. Las Vegas is a powerful social and cultural indicator. If one looks carefully enough one could see that perhaps, as we speed forth into modernity, we are not as divorced as we would like to imagine from the primeval, mystical, and magical forces which so enraptured our ancestors.

## APPENDIX

### PERMISSION TO USE ADVERTISEMENTS

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# STARDUST

RESORT & CASINO • LAS VEGAS  
BOYD GAMING CORPORATION™

March 13, 2000.

Ms. Juliet Reubens,  
125 Alondio Lane,  
Henderson, NV. 89014.

Dear Juliet,

Thank you for your telephone call this morning. You certainly may use a copy of our "CocoPalms" ad in your thesis. In fact, we are quite flattered that you like it that much!

There is a series of ads that go with that same theme using different models and "catch phrases". I have enclosed a different ad which ran in what's On magazine for you. The entire ad campaign with about five different variations of the same ad was developed to introduce our new "All-You-Can-Eatery" CocoPalms. It is intended to denote something a cut above a regular Las Vegas buffet. That was the original intent, however, after opening we got a new Food and Beverage Manager who didn't like "All-You-Can-Eatery" and has returned to "Buffet"!

I have also enclosed an ad which we ran for our previous buffet advertising. You notice the headline also says "All-You-Can-Eat Buffet". Also, this ad incorporated a very important element of advertising that we use to track how effective a particular ad campaign or a particular media placement is working for us. You will notice at the bottom right corner of the ad there are two letters, in this case "RG". That stands for Tourguide, the publication this ad appeared in. When the ad coupon is redeemed it is sent upstairs to be counted along with all other redeemed

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3000 Las Vegas Boulevard South • Las Vegas, Nevada 89109 • 702-732-6111 • 800-824-6033

Stardust WEB Address  
<http://www.stardustlv.com>

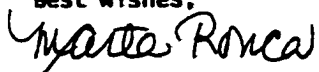
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Page 2.

coupons. Once a month we receive a coupon count report so that we can plan for the next month. This coupon count method is very important to us for both helping us develop campaigns that work for our business, but also in selecting the most effective media placement, in this case tourist publications.

Thank you again for your interest in the Stardust Hotel advertising. I wish you every bit of good luck with your thesis, but also in your future career.

Best wishes,



Marta W. Ronca,  
Director of Advertising.

Enclosures (2)

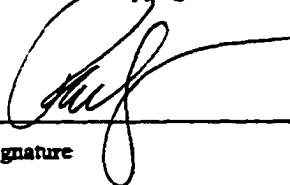
33

**Permission to Use Copyrighted Material**  
**University of Nevada, Las Vegas**

I, Patty Cooley holder  
of copyrighted material entitled Excabur Budget Ad  
authored by Excabur  
and originally published in Today's Las Vegas.

hereby give permission for the author to use the above described material in total or in part  
for inclusion in a master's thesis/doctoral dissertation at the University of Nevada, Las  
Vegas.

I also agree that the author may execute the standard contract with University Microfilms,  
Inc. for microform reproduction of the completed dissertation, including the materials to  
which I hold copyright.

  
Signature

3/31/00  
Date

Patty Cooley  
Name (typed)

Director of Marketing  
Title

EXCABUR  
Representing

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## VITA

Graduate College  
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Juliet Reubens

### Address:

125 Almendio Lane  
Henderson, NV 89014

### Degrees:

Bachelor of Arts, Anthropology (major) and Ancient  
Studies (minor), 1998.  
New York University.

### Special Awards and Honors:

1999-2000 member of Lambda Alpha Anthropology Honors  
Society.  
1997 \$10,000 grand prize winner of Hyundai 50<sup>th</sup>  
Anniversary Internet Essay Contest for University  
Students.  
1996 New York University Award for Excellence recipient.

### Publications:

1997 "Family and Human Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century" in  
Winning Essays of the Hyundai 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Internet  
Essay Contest for University Students. Hyundai  
Business Group: Seoul.

Thesis Title: The Las Vegas Phenomenon.

### Thesis Examination Committee:

Chairperson, Dr. William Jankowiak, Ph.D.  
Committee Member, Dr. George Urioste, Ph.D.  
Committee Member, Dr. Gary Palmer, Ph.D.  
Committee Member, Dr. Tony Miranda, Ph.D.  
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Donald Carns, Ph.D.