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# Learning from Las Vegas: Gambling, Technology, Capitalism, and Addiction

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**ABSTRACT:** Gambling has always led to addictive behavior in some individuals. However, the number and types of addicted gamblers have changed over time and in response to specific gambling environments. Recent work by historians, journalists, and anthropologists, reviewed in this paper, suggests that the situation worsened during the modern era, and that it has become worse still during the last half century. Technological, organizational, and marketing innovations have “weaponized” gambling, increasing both the likelihood that people will gamble and that they will gamble compulsively—a phenomenon with parallels to several other consumer products, including processed food, digitized games, and psychoactive drugs.

**Keywords:** Las Vegas; gambling history; gambling addiction; machine gambling; Internet gambling; food addiction

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I became interested in the history of gambling through an interest in addiction. By “addiction” I mean any cue-sensitive, craving-driven, compulsive behavior pursued despite dire consequences, as when a diabetic stalls in the supermarket cookie aisle and goes on an Oreo-buying binge. Addiction is a complicated phenomenon, in which social context, stress, genetic susceptibility, learning, and exposure all play a role in determining who becomes an addict and who does not. Yet all addictions have at least one thing in

common. Nobody becomes an addict unless he or she experiences something reinforcing—typically, something that produces the burst release of dopamine in the pleasure pathway of the brain. The something can be a drug, like alcohol or cocaine, or it can be a behavior, like eating rich food or immersion in an online role-playing game. It follows that, as pleasurable stimuli become more numerous, ubiquitous, and affordable, and as commercialized vices become more acceptable, enticing, and available, they will (other

things being equal) increase the amount of addiction in both absolute and in relative terms.

With the help of a Visiting Gaming Research Fellowship and the guidance of the Lied Library Special Collections staff,<sup>1</sup> I explored this hypothesis in the context of gambling history. I was greatly assisted in this task by four books, David G. Schwartz's *Roll the Bones: The History of Gambling* (2006); Larry Gragg's *Bright Light City: Las Vegas in Popular Culture* (2013); Marc Cooper's *The Last Honest Place in America: Paradise and Perdition in the New Las Vegas* (2004); and Natasha Dow Schüll's *Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas* (2012). What follows is a scholar's parlay: a review-essay of these four works; a capsule history of the industry they describe; and a discussion of how that industry is part of a "McDonaldized" (and increasingly globalized) economic system based on the scientific refinement of potentially addictive products and pastimes.

## The Five Ages of Gambling

The chronology of gambling history divides, unevenly, into five ages. For most of history (and, for that matter, prehistory) gambling was a *social* activity, a game of chance played for varying stakes by enthusiastic amateurs who were sometimes victimized by professional swindlers. In early modern Europe gambling evolved into a *mercantile* activity, in which governments and casino operators relied on favorable odds and volume business to generate steady revenue. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, gambling increasingly became a *mechanized* activity, as various devices increased the speed, efficiency, and availability of gambling. In the mid-twentieth century, notably in Las Vegas, gambling also became a form of *mass entertainment* in which middle-class tourists, freed by modern transport from the tyranny of distance and by corporate repackaging from the stigma of vice, began flocking to casino resorts. Since the late twentieth century gambling has become increasingly *digitized*, both within the casino environment and on the Internet, which has emerged as an important competitor to traditional gambling venues.

*Roll the Bones* surveys the first four of gambling's five ages. Historian David Schwartz begins his story in the ruins of a Pompeii tavern, where dicers chalked their debts on the ash-entombed walls. He ends it in the luxurious surroundings of the 2.7 billion dollar

Wynn Las Vegas, the world's most expensive casino when it opened in 2005. The intervening 500 pages, for all their biographical vignettes, comprise a case study in economic modernization. Schwartz shows us that, while gambling was always popular, it took rationalization to make it lucrative.

Gambling was commonplace in antiquity. In a world in which chance played such an obvious role in human affairs, where the gods were capricious and daily life full of risk, gambling made intuitive sense. Most games were simple, involving crude dice or odd-even wagers. Simple or not, some individuals, such as the Roman emperors Caligula and Claudius, became obsessed with gambling. Religious authorities divided over the pastime. The Koran condemned gambling, classing it with drinking and idol worship. Jewish and Christian authorities tolerated moderate gambling, particularly during designated holidays, but regarded heavy or habitual gambling as sinful. Puritans of all religious stripes worried about the waste of time as well as money.

Yet passing time was, in many ways, the point of gambling in the ancient and medieval world. Gambling was a social and recreational activity among players who were theoretically equals. (That was why, Schwartz observes, professional gamblers were invariably cheaters: Nobody was so lucky as to make a consistent living from games of pure chance.) Kings and courtiers gambled, but so did bored soldiers and plebes, using crude bone dice and simple odd-even games. In the Americas, Indian men and women rolled dice fashioned from plum pits. Assinboin men were said to beat their wives when they lost too much.

The revival of long-distance trade, first on land and then by sea, made possible the globalization of gambling technologies, just as it had spices, drugs, liquor, exotic foods, and other novel pleasures. Playing cards, which the Koreans invented and the Chinese perfected, spread west, like tea. Cards, which lent themselves to the invention of new games of chance, made possible gambling diversification. The French, who gave the world baccarat and the earliest versions of Blackjack, proved particularly ingenious in this regard. Eventually many of the new card games, as well as older forms of gambling like horse racing, made their way to the Americas, where they were popular with both immigrants and natives.

As gambling spread in the early modern world,

its character began to change. The growing understanding of probability, a branch of mathematics that blossomed in the mid-seventeenth century, made possible the precise estimation of odds. Knowing what the odds were, and how to manipulate them, in turn made it possible for professional gamblers to offer honest games and still make a regular profit. The “house edge” eliminated the need for cheating, or at least lessened its temptation. Gambling thus took a mercantile turn, manifest first in lotteries and then in casinos, which sprouted throughout Europe. The first, Venice’s Ridotto, opened in 1638. It set the basic casino pattern of accelerated play, long hours, and a range of diversions, from fine dining to sexual adventures. Cassanova was a Ridotto regular.

Spa towns popular with wealthy pleasure-seekers were natural locations for casinos, typically licensed and taxed by local rulers. Renowned for their gardens and theaters and salons, towns like Baden-Baden also became notorious for the ruin they brought to compulsive gamblers, from Fyodor Dostoyevsky to spendthrift bluebloods like Wilhelm I, the elector of Hesse. Because casinos and other forms of mercantile gambling were so ruinous, especially of aristocratic fortunes, unifying nation-states began restricting or outlawing them in the nineteenth century. First France and then Germany cracked down, which is how the tiny principality of Monaco gained its gambling foothold. When, in 1868, it also gained a railroad connection, it became the principal winter playground for wealthy Europeans. They paid, a *London Times* correspondent reported, fantastic prices for the privilege of sojourning in a perfumed, lantern-lit fairyland, “where all passions combine to obliterate the mind and obscure the reason. Since the prince of Monaco has granted the management of the Casino of Monte Carlo to the present lessee [the legendary François Blanc], Monte Carlo has become the most luxurious, most beautiful, most enervating place in the world.”<sup>2</sup>

Obliterated minds, obscured reason, luxury, and enervation: One would be hard pressed to devise a more concise list of what Victorian moral reformers sought to overcome. They attacked gambling, as well as strong drink, saloons, sex trafficking, obscene literature, and cigarettes with increasing urgency during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They feared that vice was spreading in all social classes, not just among the idle rich.

To digress for a moment, the reformers’ fears were reasonable. Technological breakthroughs, industrialization, and related improvements in transportation and communication had commercialized and spread *all* addictive vices, not just gambling. Consider drugs. Already associated with unfree labor—slaves toiling in plantation fields to grow tobacco, or addicted coolies toiling in the world’s dankest mines—drug commerce assumed an even more sinister aspect as a result of the isolation of alkaloids, the invention of hypodermic syringes, the spiking of patent medicines with narcotics, and the addition of flue-cured Bright tobacco to cigarettes. The commercial marriage of such innovations to new techniques of mass production, promotion, and distribution led to a conspicuous increase in addiction, which medical authorities increasingly described as a supply-driven disease state. Cheaper, faster-acting, and more potent drugs also increased the likelihood of poisoning, accidents, disorder, pauperization, and crime. Reformers decried these evils in the imperial homelands as well as in the colonies, serviced by gin-, tobacco-, and drug-filled steamships whose speed and gross tonnage doubled between the 1850s and 1890s.

Industrialization left no vice untouched. Steam power and rotary presses facilitated the production of playing cards, used for gambling, and pornographic literature, formerly an expensive luxury good. Photography, yet another nineteenth-century invention, was quickly adapted to pornography, often in the form of nudes on cards. Their poses sometimes gestured toward high art, but their purposes were transparently commercial and erotic. The Victorian campaigns against mass-produced obscenity were, wrote historian Andrea Friedman, a “defensive” reaction to “the flood of sexual commerce” that reformers believed “threatened the nation’s future.”<sup>3</sup> In fact, moral reformers reacted in the same fashion to every vice whose industrialization and growing availability promised more dissipation and more personal, familial, and social ruin.

To what extent did these late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformers rein in gambling? Schwartz does not—given the size of his canvas, he cannot—give a comprehensive answer to this question. He does, however, show that the international reform record was highly checkered. British colonial officials outlawed many popular gambling games, prompting Hong Kong gamblers to flee to Macau. Yet

these same officials tolerated horse racing and high-stakes card games in private homes and clubs. Many American states and municipalities outlawed gambling, only to have keno and faro parlors, well stocked with liquor and cigars, operate under corrupt police protection. In 1907 the French government began retreating from its ban on casino games, eventually cutting itself in on 60 percent of the action. Local governments took another 20 percent. Revenue was a constant temptation, and the single most important reason why commercialized vice survived the reform onslaught. Even Hitler, the least corruptible of political figures, readily granted permission to reopen the casino at Baden-Baden, whose resorts had fallen on hard times after losing their Jewish clientele. “As for the rich,” he rationalized, “opportunities should be invented for making them spend their money!”<sup>4</sup>

Wherever gambling survived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it became increasingly mechanized. The reel slot machine, invented in 1898, caught on quickly. Mechanical and then electronic totalizers permitted track operators to efficiently pool pari-mutuel bets, post shifting odds, and pay winners—minus, of course, their own commissions. Though the number of racetracks declined, betting expanded through telegraphic “race wires” that turned pool halls into bookies’ paradises. Schwartz quotes a purportedly reformed gambler, Harry Bro-laski, on what went on inside: “Men and women, boys and girls, yell, call for their horses to win, scream out in their excitement, snap their fingers and jump up and down, and the race being run a thousand miles or more away. They seem to think that they are on the track.”<sup>5</sup>

## Gambling as Mass Entertainment

Nevada casino pioneers like Bill Harrah, who left California for gambling-friendly Reno in 1937, wanted to make their customers feel something grander still. Harrah, who coined the euphemism “gaming,” recruited star entertainers and hospitable female staff and advertised nationwide to pack his slots and bars and gambling tables. He saw that gambling houses, institutions historically patronized by males from the upper and lower strata of society, could increase their volume by attracting middle-class tourists, couples with discretionary income and an itch for an exotic vacation. The trick was to create an entertainment environment where goggle-eyed visitors—is

that really Louis Prima on the bandstand?—felt important and spoiled, but never seedy. “Just the fact there’s some music—‘Ooh, wow! We’re somewhere,’ you know . . . Maybe the man wants to play, maybe the lady couldn’t care less; but there’s a little music, she may want to hang around, so it’s a good business.”<sup>6</sup> No detail was too small. If the gold leaf on the bar did not look right, Harrah had it scraped off. He put two bathrooms in his hotel suites to add a touch of class—and to speed arriving couples onto the gambling floors.

Architect Martin Stern, another detail-oriented Californian who worked for Harrah and several of his contemporaries, went on to perfect the entertainment-mecca formula in Las Vegas, notably in his seminal 1969 International Hotel. The towering, tri-form megaresort, tricked out with white marble, nude friezes, imported crystal chandeliers, international restaurants, and a 2,000-seat showroom (opening act, Barbara Streisand) became the most emulated building on the Las Vegas Strip.

Changes to Nevada law in 1967 and 1969 simplified the financing for such gargantuan projects by making it much easier for publicly traded corporations to enter the casino business—and to displace the aging ex-bootleggers and syndicate skimmers who were such a notorious part of mid-century Las Vegas. Organized crime became, as it were, reorganized. Companies like MGM, Hyatt, and Del E. Webb began buying up existing casinos and building new ones in Las Vegas and other Nevada cities.<sup>7</sup> The company that Harrah started and later sold (before succumbing to heart disease at age sixty-six, after seven marriages and a life of smoking and drinking) would itself eventually mature into an international gambling conglomerate.

Steve Wynn, whose career figures in all four books, took the next step, slathering more icing on the casino-resort cake. The non-gambling son of a compulsive gambler who left his family mired in debt, Wynn found his métier in integrated hedonic design. His 1989 South-Seas-themed Mirage, replete with boutiques, tropical fish, a rain forest, and Sigfried and Roy’s white tigers, was a glitzier, scaled-up version of the International-Hotel-style complexes. As Schwartz puts it, the Mirage was more a self-contained entertainment resort that happened to have a casino than a casino that happened to provide entertainment.<sup>8</sup>



The success of the Mirage triggered an emulatory boom, first inside Las Vegas and then outside of it. If Wynn helped to make Las Vegas the entertainment capital of the world, he also made the city a world entertainment model. Luxurious casino-resorts began sprouting in places as far distant as Christchurch, New Zealand. Like “café,” “casino” became an international cognate and prominent part of the global signscape. Wynn and rival Sheldon Adelson took a particular interest in exporting the formula to Macau, rechristened “the Vegas of the East.” Long a center of gambling and other vices, Macau had another obvious attraction. Some 450 million people lived within a five-hour flight of Las Vegas. For Macau, the figure was 3 billion.<sup>9</sup>

What Las Vegas was about, Wynn benignly observed, was giving visitors “a rich and deep emotional experience. They want to do things they are familiar with, but they want to do it bigger and better when they go on vacation.”<sup>10</sup> But the essential cognitive link, that *Vegas* meant bigger and better fun, also had to be in place: It was not a matter of build it and they will come. Like space travel, Las Vegas had to be established in the popular cultural imagination before it could really take flight.<sup>11</sup>

*Bright Light City* reconstructs that imaginary. Larry Gragg, a specialist in Early American history, became fascinated by Las Vegas after he visited the city in 1992. He returned annually, read everything he could find on its history, and then asked a simple but important question: “What explains the ever-greater popularity of Las Vegas to tourists?” In 1941, ten years into the city’s legal gambling regime, Las Vegas had 125,000 tourists. In 2005, it had 38.6 million. Somehow the casino operators and city fathers had made Las Vegas tourism grow more than twenty times faster than the U.S. population.

Gragg finds the key to their success in the carefully cultivated image of the city as an adult playground that offered escape from the workaday world. Accommodating journalists, public-relations men, and filmmakers burnished the “safe edge” entertainment brand that Harrah and his contemporaries had conjured up and broadcast it to the world through celebrity-studded news stories, gossip and travel columns, and movies like *Oceans Eleven* (1960) and *Viva Las Vegas* (1964). Promotional firms, including the world’s largest ad agency, J. Walter Thompson, churned out flattering copy, photographs, and advertisements,

choice specimens of which appear in the book’s color gallery. Though intellectuals of the New York variety reliably dumped on the city (“quite literally, like Hell,” sniffed Nat Hentoff), Gragg shrewdly observes that their output was dwarfed by “the thousands of articles about Las Vegas [that] were filed by entertainment and travel columnists who frankly enjoyed covering Las Vegas, a pleasure enhanced by the long tradition of hotels providing them with rooms, meals, and shows.”<sup>12</sup> There’s no coverage like suborned coverage.

Americans got the message. Gragg quotes a telling passage from William Pearson’s 1965 novel, *The Muses of Ruin*:

An ordinary fellow from a place like South Bend, Indiana can’t wait to catch the first plane to Vegas. For thirty bucks a day he and his wife can knock on Eden’s back door. For thirty bucks a day he gets a room with an air-conditioned view—it would be thirty or more just for the room in Miami, and raining besides—breakfast at noon on a terrace overlooking a Hollywood-sized pool where his favorite Hollywood cutie pie is sun-bathing in a rhinestone swim suit, plus big drinks, big steaks, big evening of watching big movie or TV names shilling for their supper at twenty or thirty grand a week, and a chance at the jackpot on the dollar slots.<sup>13</sup>

Pearson’s ordinary fellow was extraordinary in one sense: He lived in a society that had achieved, in a single generation, both mass affluence and mass aviation. By the 1950s visitors could fly nonstop for 75 dollars from Chicago to Vegas for an “evening of fun” on a TWA Sky Tourist Constellation. In the 1960s and 1970s fuel-efficient fan jets, jumbo jets, and deregulated fares further democratized long-distance travel. In 1958 about 60 commercial flights a day landed at McCarran Airport. By 1988 that number had grown to 522.<sup>14</sup>

It is worth recalling that McCarran Airport was named for a U.S. senator who championed federal support of aviation. What sometimes gets lost in Gragg’s cultural *catalogue raisonné*, based on over 2,000 articles, novels, television programs, and films, is that Las Vegas’s flowering required concrete government support as well as Rat-Pack stars and shimmying show girls. Las Vegas had cheap power and a reliable supply of water, thanks to the federal Boulder Canyon Project. It had federal highway connections to fast-growing California, its natural market. Even then, the city would have remained a regional des-

tination had not the jet revolution—heavily subsidized by the federal government—put gamblers from eastern Asia to western Europe within a long day's flight of the desert Eden. Travel packagers took care of the rest, putting together inexpensive junkets that enabled the casino operators to grind out profits throughout the year. And, of course, it was a state law, Nevada's 1931 gambling act, that permitted licensed gambling establishments in the first place.

## Rage against the (Digital) Machine

Both Schwartz and Gragg acknowledge the reality of gambling addiction. Schwartz tells of the Countess Sophie Kisseleff, said to gamble just once a day, “from eleven in the morning until eleven at night,” and who left a fortune on the roulette tables. The most common image of the compulsive gambler Gragg found in his American sources occupied the other end of the social spectrum: the forlorn old lady in tennis shoes and gloves, grimly pulling away at the slots with one hand, paper cup of change in her other.<sup>15</sup> Neither author, though, dwells on addiction, which they treat

as secondary to the task of explaining the rise of an important and increasingly mainstream industry.

The same cannot be said of journalist Marc Cooper and cultural anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll. Both adopt a more critical tone toward Las Vegas and its history—more particularly, to its transition from a human entertainment environment with many gambling machines to a digitized machine environment with many zombified humans. Cooper and Schüll turn Gragg's approach on its head. Instead of searching for the image of Las Vegas in the culture, they want to discern the culture in Las Vegas itself. And they don't much like what they see.

Cooper is a leftist of the Pacifica school, but also grumpy contrarian, which makes him unpredictable and worth reading. He likes gambling and he likes the old Las Vegas, personified as an affable blackjack dealer who gives a player friendly advice and half a chance by dealing from a single deck. Good luck finding that sort of croupier in the new Las Vegas of continuous shuffling machines and rows of beeping devices that take no coffee breaks, demand no mater-



Gambling's digital revolution: High-maintenance devices like the quarter slots at the old Mint Hotel have given way to much faster and efficient games like video poker. For millennia gambling was a widespread social activity based on simple technologies like dice or cards. Since the late nineteenth century it has become increasingly mechanized, digitized, and rationalized to minimize costs and maximize profits, but at the price of increasing the risk of addiction. Sources: Mint Hotel Collection 0235 0002; IGT promotional materials, Special Collections, Lied Library, UNLV.



nity leaves, and require no skill to operate, yet offer tremendous neural stimulation. “For some people, something like the Fourth of July is going off in their brains as they gamble,” gaming researcher Bo Bernhard tells Cooper. “It’s trendy to say gambling is sweeping America. But mostly it’s machine gambling that’s sweeping America. And these machines are a convergence of so many factors: the logic of capitalism, technology, and increasing comfort with machines.”<sup>16</sup>

Machine gamblers are escape gamblers, as opposed to the action gamblers commonly found at the Blackjack and craps tables. “Ever meet a machine player who thinks he’s James Bond,” a Blackjack expert dryly remarks. The most compulsive machine players are women, and not necessarily old ladies in tennis shoes. “Today the problem gambler is likely to be a thirty-four-year-old woman with two kids and two years of college,” explains Dr. Robert Hunter, whom Cooper interviewed at the Las Vegas Problem Gambling Center. “We’re not seeing many of the dinosaur action gamblers who play to feel a rush. We’re seeing people who say they want to feel numb, want to blank out, want to lose track.” “I get to disappear,” agreed one of his patients, then abstinent for twenty-two days. “It allows me to escape my world.” Her escapism came at a high price. She lost more than \$200,000 in three years.<sup>17</sup>

Cooper, every inch a dinosaur action gambler, despises the new Las Vegas. He nonetheless finds it diagnostically useful, a high-resolution X-ray of American capitalism. Almost as if addressing Gragg, Cooper writes that “Vegas is often described as a city of dreams and fantasy, of tinselish make-believe. But this is getting it backward. Vegas is instead the American market ethic stripped completely bare, a mini-world free of the pretenses and protocols of modern consumer capitalism.” What other place would post billboards promoting “97 percent guaranteed payback on slot play?” Only an honest place, Cooper observes, whence his backhanded title. Like the cultural critic Neil Postman, to whom *The Last Honest Place in America* is dedicated, Cooper thinks Las Vegas has become the symbolic capital of post-Reagan America in the same way that Boston became the symbolic capital of Revolutionary America. Only Boston was promoting liberty. Vegas is promoting digitized license.<sup>18</sup>

Addicted machine gamblers are also central to *Addiction by Design*, which is organized as a cat-and-

mouse story. Shifting between the perspective of the hunters and the hunted, Schüll poses two basic questions. How did casino and game designers manage to hook so many people on video slots and video poker? And why were so many of their victims women, including young women resident in Las Vegas?

The answer to the first question is that the hunters, using Las Vegas as their proving ground, perfected computerized gambling machines that doubled as marketing and tracking devices. The machines’ television themes and resemblance to popular consumer electronic devices gave them an aura of entertainment innocence while attracting a new generation of gamblers. Many of the younger players turned out to be anxious, depressed women seeking respite from burdensome lives in a neoliberal society whose expectations they could not possibly match. If Cooper sees American capitalism reflected in Las Vegas, Schüll sees American capitalism’s losers. They don’t play to escape their plight by chasing a big win. They play to escape, period. Their goal, said one, is “to stay in that machine zone where nothing else matters.”<sup>19</sup>

Casino architects obligingly created labyrinthine environments in which these players could lose themselves, satisfying their desire to escape to the point of “extinction”—that is, until their stamina or money ran out. Problem gamblers provide the casinos with 30 to 60 percent of their profits. And they are overwhelmingly machine gamblers. Their solitary, continuous, and rapid wagering on digitized gambling machines, with seductive refinements like apparent jackpot near misses, creates a trancelike state in which players became oblivious to anxiety, depression, and boredom. Digitized machine gambling is as reliable as Valium and faster-acting.

Another way to say this is that digitized machine gambling is a drug. Regular players of video gambling devices become addicted three to four times more rapidly than those who gamble in other ways. They also play more rapidly, whipping through video poker hands at a rate of one every three or four seconds. Compulsive players become transfixed, unable to leave the machines despite growling stomachs and full bladders. Addiction exhausts them physically as well as financially. “I don’t feel great preying on psychological weaknesses of little old ladies,” a game developer admits to Schüll, whose interviewing skills are as sharp as Cooper’s. “I can’t sit here and say, *I only put the screws in the bomb, I only assemble the*

*warhead*, because I'm sure that products I've made have destroyed people's lives somewhere."<sup>20</sup>

### **Weaponized Pleasure, McDonaldization, and Addiction**

To turn a product into a bomb is to weaponize it. This is, I think, the key theme that emerges from these four books, a theme that is fully visible only in the sweep of history. For millennia the enhancement of human pleasure was casual, folkish, and often serendipitous. Someone came up with a tasty recipe, an amusing new game, or an appealing drug combination. Friends and neighbors copied the result, and merchants and manufacturers got on the bandwagon. But that pattern has changed over the last century, as top-down hedonic engineering has increasingly replaced bottom-up innovation. Smart people in the pay of wealthy corporations have systematically devised products that entice and ensnare their customers, in the process altering the neurochemistry of their brains.

Hedonic weaponization has occurred in industry after industry. The makers of video games study young players and analyze their mouse clicks to devise reinforcement schedules that will prolong time of play and stimulate purchase of digital products tied to the game. In fact, the biggest worry Las Vegas gaming designers have is that their pure digital rivals—those unencumbered by the need to lure customers to brick-and-mortar facilities—will succeed in monopolizing young gamers' time and that gambling itself will eventually migrate online, leaving half-empty casinos to aging baby-boomers and rock-and-roll nostalgia acts. What to do about this threat currently divides the industry. Innovators like John Acres proclaim adapt or die. Standpatters like Sheldon Adelson vow to spend "whatever it takes" to stop Internet gambling. As the eleventh richest man in America, he has a lot to spend.<sup>21</sup>

Though the food industry is seldom compared to gaming, its postwar history offers a striking parallel to weaponized gambling. Food engineers have learned to arm their products, not with progressive jackpots, LED displays, and television jingles, but with sugar, fat, and salt. They strategically reinforce our natural preference for sweet

foods with early exposure to sugary products like breakfast cereals and sodas, which teach us to expect that all foods and drinks should be sweet. Fat, which provides a delicious "mouthfeel," interacts alluringly with sugar, which in turn makes rich foods seem less fat—and less unhealthful—than they actually are. Salt enhances desirable tastes like sweetness and masks undesirable ones like bitterness. A natural preservative, salt is also available unnaturally, in engineered shapes that journalist Michael Moss likens to "finely tuned bliss machines." Cargill, Inc. makes a flake that clings to every nook and cranny of popcorn, "the better to lash the taste buds, instantaneously, with a direct hit of salt."<sup>22</sup>

The right combination of sugar, fat, and salt, calculated by mathematical models and validated by large-scale taste testing ( $n=3,904$  for one Dr. Pepper product), can render almost any food delicious. Plain potatoes are not particularly appetizing. Sliced thin, fried in fat, and coated with sugar and salt, they are delectable, and are made the more so by product line extensions like chips with cheddar and sour cream. Just as Bill Harrah artfully blended pleasures to create an irresistible entertainment environment, food scientists have blended irresistible food products. Mass-produced from cheap, often subsidized, ingredients, they provide inexpensive calories with no burden of preparation. Buy, open, and enjoy.

Weberian sociologists call this process "McDonaldization." Like the fare served in fast-food restaurants, the processed food in grocery and convenience stores has been standardized, industrialized, globalized, and scientifically designed to maximize brain reward and corporate profits. The paradox of McDonaldization is that economic rationality begets social irrationality. McDonaldized food means widespread obesity, diabetes, hypertension, dental caries, and compulsive overeating. The proportion of fat people who currently meet the clinical criteria for food addiction ranges from 25 to 37.5 percent.<sup>23</sup>

What are the analogous addiction rates for McDonaldized gambling? Industry apologists argue that no more than 1 or 2 percent of the population meets the diagnostic criteria for pathological gambling, with perhaps 3 or 4 percent qualifying



for the less severe “problem gambling.” But, as Schüll points out, those figures are for the *general* population. “The percentage of pathological and problem gamblers among the *gambling* population is a good deal higher, and higher still among *regular* (or “repeat”) gamblers—20 percent, by some estimates.”<sup>24</sup>

The difference, of course, is that eating is universal while gambling is not. But the point about exposure remains valid. The more gambling becomes like eating—the more people regularly patronize McDonaldized casinos or play on McDonaldized gambling machines or try their luck at their Internet equivalents—the more gambling addicts there will be. The industry understands this fact, and recognizes it as a huge public-relations problem and potential litigation nightmare. Trying to avoid the fate of the tobacco companies, it has preemptively financed gambling treatment centers (including the one in Las Vegas), gambling hot lines, “gamble responsibly” ads and leaflets, and Harvard-class scientific research aimed at identifying the most susceptible individuals so that they might, in theory, be warned off.<sup>25</sup>

None of this legal tiptoeing makes the McDonaldization paradox go away, or obscures the fundamental lesson of Las Vegas’s recent history. The lesson is this: Weaponized gambling—in fact, any weaponized pleasure or combination of pleasures—uses the technological means of modernity to betray the progressive promise of modernity. Hedonic weaponization fosters behaviors that are rational for profit-maximizing corporations but irrational for addicted individuals and, ultimately, for any nominally enlightened government pledged to promote the wellbeing of its citizens.

## About the Author



**David T. Courtwright** received his B.A. in English from the University of Kansas and his Ph.D. in History from Rice University. He is Presidential Professor at the University of North Florida and the author of *Forces of Habit* (2001), *Dark Paradise* (revised ed., 2001), *Addicts Who Survived* (revised ed., 2012), and other works about drug use, drug policy, and addiction.

## Endnotes

- 1 I would especially like to thank Dr. Peter Michel, Tom Summer, and Kelli Luchs, as well as Dr. David G. Schwartz, the director of the Center for Gaming Research, the Special Collections unit devoted to gambling and related subjects.
- 2 Reprinted in the *New York Times*, April 23, 1873, as "Monaco. Nice and Its Neighbors—The New Gambling Place of the Old World." David G. Schwartz, *Roll the Bones: The History of Gambling* (New York: Gotham, 2006), 302, quotes an abbreviated version of the same passage.
- 3 Andrea Friedman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909-1945* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 18.
- 4 *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941-1944*, ed. H. R. Trevor-Roper, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Enigma, 2008), 127.
- 5 Schwartz, *Roll the Bones*, 335.
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