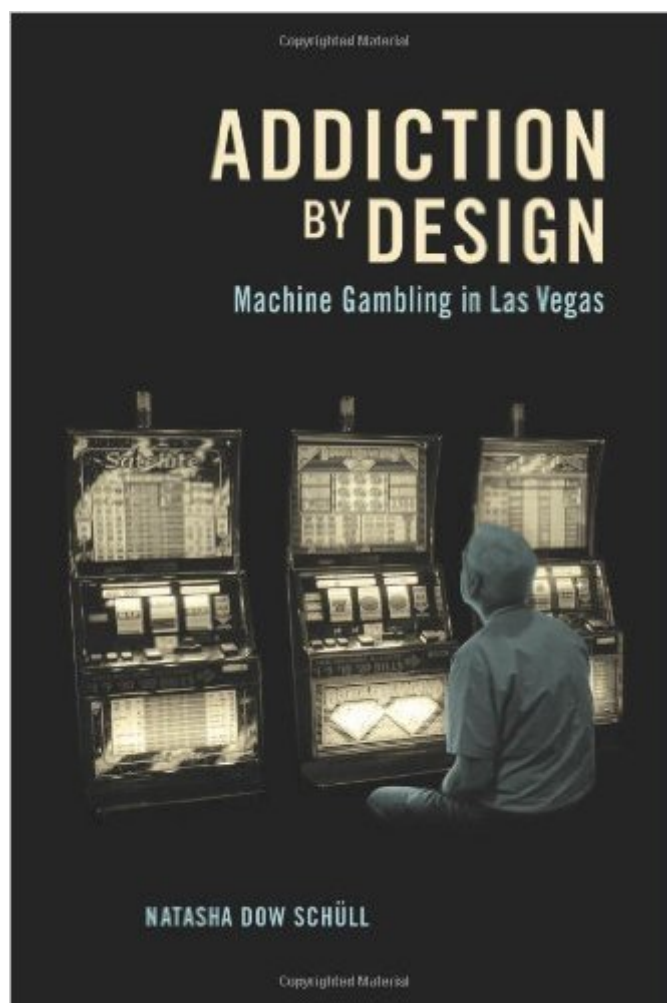


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# Addiction By Design: Machine Gambling In Las Vegas



## Synopsis

Recent decades have seen a dramatic shift away from social forms of gambling played around roulette wheels and card tables to solitary gambling at electronic terminals. Slot machines, revamped by ever more compelling digital and video technology, have unseated traditional casino games as the gambling industry's revenue mainstay. *Addiction by Design* takes readers into the intriguing world of machine gambling, an increasingly popular and absorbing form of play that blurs the line between human and machine, compulsion and control, risk and reward. Drawing on fifteen years of field research in Las Vegas, anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll shows how the mechanical rhythm of electronic gambling pulls players into a trancelike state they call the "machine zone," in which daily worries, social demands, and even bodily awareness fade away. Once in the zone, gambling addicts play not to win but simply to keep playing, for as long as possible--even at the cost of physical and economic exhaustion. In continuous machine play, gamblers seek to lose themselves while the gambling industry seeks profit. Schüll describes the strategic calculations behind game algorithms and machine ergonomics, casino architecture and "ambiance management," player tracking and cash access systems--all designed to meet the market's desire for maximum "time on device." Her account moves from casino floors into gamblers' everyday lives, from gambling industry conventions and Gamblers Anonymous meetings to regulatory debates over whether addiction to gambling machines stems from the consumer, the product, or the interplay between the two. *Addiction by Design* is a compelling inquiry into the intensifying traffic between people and machines of chance, offering clues to some of the broader anxieties and predicaments of contemporary life. At stake in Schüll's account of the intensifying traffic between people and machines of chance is a blurring of the line between design and experience, profit and loss, control and compulsion.

## Book Information

Paperback: 456 pages

Publisher: Princeton University Press; Reprint edition (May 11, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0691160880

ISBN-13: 978-0691160887

Product Dimensions: 6.1 x 1.1 x 9.2 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.7 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars See all reviews (51 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #84,427 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #4 in Books > Health, Fitness & Dieting > Addiction & Recovery > Gambling #40 in Books > Computers & Technology > Computer Science > Human-Computer Interaction #50 in Books > Humor & Entertainment > Puzzles & Games > Gambling

## Customer Reviews

Natasha Dow Schill's *Addiction by Design* is one of the most compelling books I've read in the past few years. Not because I was ever captivated by slot machines or video poker. In my entire life I lost a total of \$5 to a slot machine and, quite frankly, even then I didn't consider the experience worth anywhere close to \$5. But the experience has changed, thanks to technology and mathematical algorithms; it has a deeper hook. Schill, an associate professor at MIT, argues that addiction to machine gambling stems from the interplay between the gambler and the machine. Drawing on fifteen years of field research in Las Vegas and extensive interviews with both designers and addicts, she shows how the "duty to extract as much money" as possible from customers and the desire to play for as long as possible combine to produce a recipe for potential addiction. Slot machines have come a long way from the coin-fed mechanical one-armed bandits. They now use video technology, which speeds up play significantly. On average, pulling a handle resulted in 300 games an hour. Video poker players can complete 900 to 1,200 hands an hour; the rate is similar on video slots. (p. 55) The financial flow in casinos has also sped up. Players no longer have to carry around heavy cups of coins or wait for payouts. Instead, casinos are "cashless." Moreover, players who run out of money can easily tap into their checking accounts, credit cards, or debit cards--in numerous jurisdictions right from their machines--to keep on going. Early on programmers devised techniques "not only to distort players' perception of games' odds but also to distort their perception of losses, by creating 'near miss' effects.

The best book on the techno-human intersection I've read in a long time, and also highly depressing. If you've read Temple Grandin on humanely getting cattle through the slaughtering chutes, you might recognize the same spirit in this depiction of best practices for casino design: "passageways should keep twisting and turning through gradual, gentle curves and angles that smooth out the shifts in direction.' Aisles leading into gambling areas 'should narrow gradually, so walkers do not notice the approaching transition until they suddenly find themselves immersed in the intimate worlds of gambling action.'" The games themselves are designed to create a false sense of efficacy in the gambler--players who feel they can have an effect on outcomes will keep

playing longer. And they are designed to create a false sense of the odds of winning and the magnitude of wins: reels are programmed so that there are fewer opportunities to win than it looks like there should be based on the number of symbols on the reel; reels are programmed to stop so that it often looks like there was a near miss (and regulators ignored the deceptive potential, because it was good for the industry); "teaser" reels display before you play with more winning combinations than actually available; and then payoffs less than the original bet are rewarded with "winner!" notifications, creating "a sense of winning" and allowing people to play longer and more smoothly as their money drops to zero. It was pretty chilling to read that the most recent "subtle yet radical innovation is precisely [new machines'] capacity to make losses appear to gamblers as wins, such that players experience the reinforcement of winning even as they steadily lose.

I have no idea what to rate this book because one, I can't finish it, and two, my beef isn't with the contents per se. I'm shocked that this book received nothing but 4 and 5 star reviews. Must've all been by academics. I'm trying, for probably the 5th time, to read some of this book and I just can't focus. It's written like a thesis paper. It reads like a thesaurus exploded all over a psych degree to impress an english professor. I was excited to get this book after hearing an interview on a radio program about it. I am researching design manipulation (for practical reasons, not academic) and this was absolutely perfectly the type of thing I was looking for. The concepts are simple enough, and quite fascinating, but the writing is just awful. I'm not normally one to be so blunt (nor mean), but I can't help it, mostly because I'm shocked that I seem to be the lone voice. Here is a very typical example of the writing: "To ignore the continuum of problematic experience among gamblers is to minimize the extent of the phenomenon, they suggest. Departing from the dominant medical emphasis on the psychological, genetic, and neurophysiological factors that might predispose an isolated subset of individuals to "maladaptive gambling behaviour," they seek to understand how commercial gambling activities and environments might create the conditions for - and even encourage - such behaviour in consumers." I literally just turned to a random page and wrote down the first thing I saw. Do I understand every word in those two sentences? Sure do. Do I understand what the author is trying to say here? Sure do. Is it enjoyable to read in the slightest? Sure isn't. It reads like a dry textbook as opposed to a book you read out of want.

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