



Gambling machine annexes as enabling spaces for addictive engagement



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ABSTRACT

The widespread proliferation of electronic gambling machines and improvements to their design have contributed to rising levels of gambling-related harm including harms associated with addictive behaviour and other impacts on health and wellbeing. Research into their addictive potential has focused mainly on the interface between gamblers and the machines themselves. We shift the focus onto the spatial contexts, the rooms and the venues, in which gambling machines are positioned. By examining a series of common layouts we identify the division of venues into two main areas: one for the main social activities of the venue (the “main hall”) and the other a partitioned area (the “annex”) in which gambling machines are tightly clumped in ways that discourage social interaction. Other features of the annex that encourage uninterrupted and solitary play include the absence of tables to socialize around, dimmed lighting and entry pathways that minimize scrutiny. We argue that these features promote a style of play more oriented towards heavy and problematic gambling. We also explore explanations for the nature of these annexes and discuss implications for public health.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of commercial gambling machines (also variously referred to as ‘slots’, ‘fruit machines’, ‘poker machines’ or ‘electronic gambling machines’) has contributed to global increases in the rates of addictive behaviour associated with gambling (Markham et al., 2014). In most developed countries, machine designers and gambling providers have enjoyed relative freedom in developing the addictive potential of gambling machines with few constraints by governments (Adams, 2007). Researchers have uncovered a variety of strategies used by designers to enhance the addictive potential of gambling machines such as the use of operant psychology and reward-contingency models (Dixon et al., 2006), manipulations of how the outcome of reel spins are displayed to give players false perceptions of their odds of winning (Falkiner and Horbay, 2006) and the use of incremental betting systems to entice gamblers into heavier involvement (Turner and Horbay, 2003). But this research and other efforts to understand the potency of gambling machines has focused by-and-large on the interface between players and machines (Harrigan et al., 2014; Schellinck and Schrans, 2011). Little attention has focused on the role gambling contexts and environments play in player interactions with machines and their potential to facilitate addictive engagement.

Yet it makes sense to consider the immediate environment in which a player interacts with these machines as contributing in a number of ways to the heightened experience that gambling offers (Kairouz et al., 2015; Cosgrave, 2010; Cassidy, 2010; Reith, 1999). For example, Sytze

Kingma examined the effects of features in the layout of a Dutch casino and pointed out how aspects of space (such as segregation, confinement, and containment), aspects of consumption (such as the technologies) and aspects from the socio-cultural context (such as use of language like ‘entertainment’, ‘gaming’, and ‘guests’ rather than gambling and gamblers), interact to enhance the excitement of gambling (Kingma, 2008, 2009). In a detailed study of the influence of venue characteristics in Australian gambling venues, Hing and Haw (2010) found problem gamblers were more likely than other types of gamblers to endorse aspects such as not being interrupted during play, gambling privately without feeling watched, having a “Las Vegas” type atmosphere and having a layout that allows privacy. Others have pointed out the potent chemistry of interactions between place, technology and psychology in explaining why so many people feel compelled to return and keep returning to play the machines in these venues (Schüll, 2005; Young et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2012). For example, Young and Tyler (2008) pointed out how supply-demand dynamics with gambling are mediated by factors associated with the venues and the markets they operate in. Moreover, looking at this from another angle, some changes in gambling environments have also played a role in moderating gambling behaviour. Most notably, smoking bans in casinos and other gambling venues has led to sizeable decreases in gambling machine play (Babb et al., 2015; Hirschberg and Lye, 2010).

The gambling industry has actively explored the role of gambling “servicescapes” in influencing gambling behaviour. Research in casin-

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nos, from a leisure and hospitality management perspective, has investigated ways in which venue characteristics can contribute to customer retention and revisit intention. For example, Wakefield and Blodgett (1996) compared a variety of service settings and found gambling machine customers responsive to aspects such as layout accessibility, facility aesthetics, seating comfort and the quality of electronic equipment. Lucas (2003) surveyed gambling machine players in Las Vegas casinos regarding venue characteristics and found aspects such as the ease of venue navigation, perceived cleanliness and interior décor correlated with player satisfaction. Similarly Lam et al. (2011) surveyed players in Macau casinos and found servicescape features such as spatial layout, seating comfort and interior décor affected players desire to revisit.

While industry-oriented research has focused on ways for venues to better engage and retain machine gamblers, from a health and well-being perspective we are more interested in the potential for the design of venues to reduce gambling-related harm. This requires looking more closely at the ways in which those who engage frequently with machine gambling experience and value this involvement.

Frequent players have variously described the psychological “zone” they experience when playing on the machines as a psychological space in which the player feels, on the one hand, disconnected from their daily life and, on the other, connected to something meaningful and significant, as though they are coming home to a place of validity and acceptance. For example, Natasha Schüll in her book *Addiction by Design* describes the experiences of regular gamblers on machines in Las Vegas casinos. From their accounts she has proposed that the zone is a place of escape for people in socially marginal positions—such as underprivileged or culturally marginalised people – from the hard realities of daily existence (Schüll, 2012). Alternatively, Charles Livingstone has described the zone as a space for meaningful connectivity in which an isolated individual experiences a sense of being part of something greater (Livingstone, 2005). Debates regarding the psychological dimensions of the zone are not the focus for this paper, but what will be explored is how the design of gambling venues promotes a form of solitary and anonymous play that promotes entry to the zone and, accordingly, entices players into gambling addictively.

2. Venue complexity

The places in which machine gambling occurs involve a variety of interconnecting relationships. Fig. 1 identifies three of these relationships:

As mentioned earlier, the interactions between gamblers and gambling machines (I1) has attracted the attention of researchers (Harrigan et al., 2014; Harrigan and Dixon, 2009). However, what has attracted very little attention is the interactions between gambling rooms and the venues they are housed in (I2) and how these interact with the gambler/machine interface (I3) (Markham et al., 2014; Thomas et al., 2009; Young et al., 2012).

Before considering gambling venues, it pays to consider the interplay between spaces in a much older public venue, the medieval cathedral. The layout of a cathedral also consists of a complex arrangement of intersecting spaces. The nave forms the main area

and is marked by a vaulted ceiling and stained-glass windows and functions as the main public space where the faithful can stand next to each other and join in with ceremonies of shared worship. Screened off in front of the nave, the choir or chancel is a smaller, more ornate area where clergy worship and choirs perform. Offset from the ambulatory, which surrounds the back of the chancel, is a set of side-chapels. In contrast to the nave, the side-chapels have low ceilings, small private altars and often contain tombs of kings or other notables. Other similarly more private spaces include the crypt down below the chancel and, for the larger abbey churches, a covered cloister where monks and other clergy can walk around a courtyard in quiet prayer and contemplation. This contrast between public and personal spaces generates its own dynamics. Collective worship occurring in the grand magnificence of the nave contrasts with – and to some extent highlights – the more intimate worship occurring alone in the quiet atmosphere of the side-chapels.

The buildings or venues which house gambling machines can be roughly divided into two types of spaces, the main hall and the annex. The main hall—like the cathedral’s nave—is the central social space of the venue. It is designed as a highly visual space with the main areas reasonably well-lit and furniture distributed to enable people to interact and to observe themselves and others interacting. Core activities in the main hall include dining, drinking, meetings and performances. The gambling machine annex—like the cathedral side-chapel—is a partitioned space adjacent to the main hall which typically contains rows of gambling machines and little else. The emphasis here is on low visibility and low sociability. As with the cathedral, this combination of a visible, social space next to a less visible, solitary space generates a dynamic; the social nature of one space emphasizes the intimate nature of the other space, and, accordingly, the intimacy of one emphasizes the sociability of the other.

3. Common layouts

The following diagrams present schematic representations of three common layouts for gambling machine venues: bar, club and casino layouts. These by no means exhaust the range of possible configurations, moreover considerable variation occurs within each type of layout. These schematic examples have been chosen because they illustrate the contrasting dynamics between main halls and annexes.

To begin with, in countries such as South Africa, Sweden and New Zealand gambling machines are most commonly positioned in hotels and bars as depicted in Fig. 2:

In the bar layout, the main hall is dominated by spaces designed for socializing and consuming alcohol. It is typically a high visibility space with furniture arranged for people to move freely between the tables and the bar. In contrast to the open social spaces of the main hall, the gambling machine annex is typically a smaller adjoining or partitioned

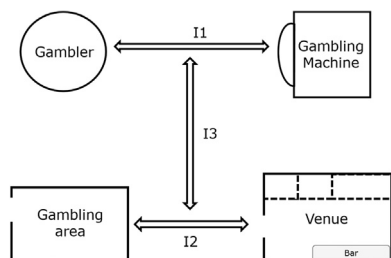


Fig. 1. Interactions between gambler, machine, gambling area and venue.

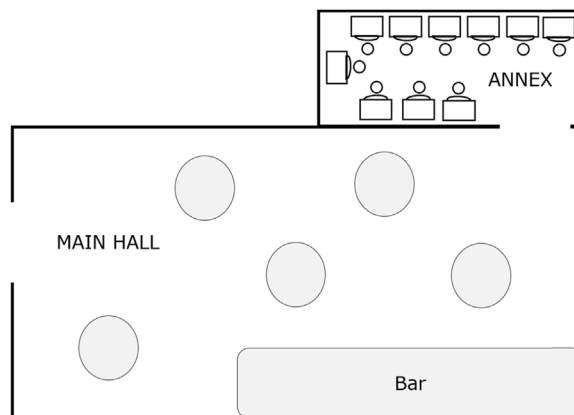


Fig. 2. Bar layout.

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