Escape Mechanism:
Women, Caretaking, and
Compulsive Machine Gambling

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Abstract

In this working paper I explore the links between caretaking responsibilities, video poker machines, and female compulsive gambling. Drawing on ethnographic observations and interviews with women video poker addicts in Las Vegas, I suggest that they have discovered a highly addictive mechanism of escape from what they experience as an excess of relational demands at home and at work. The aims of this paper are twofold: (1) I argue that the desire for such an escape is symptomatic of unresolved anxieties and tensions surrounding the place of care in our discursively individualist society, and, (2) I argue that the gaming industry, by engineering consumer technologies that capitalize on this desire, is implicated in the phenomenon of machine addiction among women. These arguments offer alternatives to a neoliberal understanding of excessive gambling as poor exercise of "free choice" and a related biomedical understanding of excessive gambling as a genetically based "pathology."

> A woman whose 10 day old baby died in a sweltering car while she played video poker…pleaded guilty to involuntary manslaughter in the August 1997 death of her daughter, Joy. Mrs. Baker spent 15 months in jail awaiting trial. Mrs. Baker, who was then living in Savannah, Ga., left her daughter in the car for more than seven hours while she played video poker at a casino on the South Carolina state line. The car's windows were closed, and the temperature outside reached the mid-90's. The baby died of dehydration after about two hours in the car.
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> *New York Times,* 1999

In an article called "Monster Stories," anthropologist Anna Tsing (1990: 288) examines the way in which the popular media cast women charged with endangering their fetuses (through unassisted childbirth, for instance) as criminal figures embodying the unnatural position of the "anti-mother": Uncaring, unemotional, irresponsible, nonnurturing, self-oriented, calculating, and "too autonomous." Linking the public anxiety surrounding these traits in females to the "dangerous climate" created by career women and feminists, Tsing argues that "monster stories" function to spread warning of women's potential to endanger their children, to "advise women of the new public agenda in which children…must be saved from their own mothers. Like other cautionary tales, these stories advise and inform about acceptable ways to live" (282).

Two researchers in the field of problem gambling have noticed that women who gamble compulsively with machines are, like the women Tsing writes of, portrayed as anti-mothers:

> The profile of the female gamblers the media paints often reflects stereotypical images, such as the "irresponsible Madonna." The print media in particular sensationalize stories about female gamblers, focusing on their maternal roles. Stories about male gamblers rarely, if ever, focus on their parental roles, except from a financial viewpoint. (Mark and Lesieur 1992: 560)

In this working paper I go beyond a critique of representation and venture into the riskier terrain of behavior, arguing that female gambling addicts do in fact act in an unmotherly fashion (unmotherly, that is, with respect to socially accepted notions of what constitutes good mothering). Unlike newspaper and television reports whose depictions of

gambling women suggest the same, I attempt to understand their unmotherliness in relation to the larger cultural context in which it unfolds.

Although psychological and sociological studies have begun to investigate how the behavior of mothers who gamble affects their children (Darbyshire, Oster and Carrig 2001), none addresses how the demands of mothering might contribute to mothers' gambling. In an article entitled "When Lady Luck Loses: Women and Compulsive Gambling" Henry Lesieur and Sheila Blume (1991) cite observations that females demonstrate a greater sense of responsibility for the well-being of others than males (for example, Gilligan 1982), yet they fail to adequately pursue the implications of these observations. One aim of this paper is to do just that. If women in our society act more readily than men in a caretaking manner, how might this social fact contribute to gender differences in compulsive gambling behavior? Might there be a connection between excessive gambling with machines and the relational obligations women experience at home and at work? Women video poker addicts, I argue, do not seek out gambling because they are bad mothers, but may become bad mothers because they discover in machine gambling a highly addictive relief mechanism—a means of escape from what they experience as an excess of demands and responsibilities to care for others. The desire for such an escape, I suggest, is symptomatic of unresolved anxieties and tensions surrounding the place of care in our discursively individualist society.

A second aim of this paper is to argue that gaming industry technologies are engineered, designedmanaged, and marketed to capitalize on this desire. In the literature of problem gambling, attention is most often dedicated to the psychodynamics and possible biological predispositions of the afflicted person and, to a lesser extent, her social world; there are surprisingly few considerations, even within discussions that focus specifically on machine gambling, of the technology that gamblers interact with. Throughout the paper I address this blindspot.

Context: Video Poker in Las Vegas

In *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* Daniel Bell (1973) addresses the shift from assembly-line factory work to service sector work and proclaims that the fundamental fact

about work in the late 20th century is that "individuals now talk to other individuals, rather than interact with a machine." In light of Bell's claim, it is no small irony that in the post-industrial world individuals are dedicating increasing amounts of their time away from work (i.e., "leisure time") to activities that involve machines. In turn increasing numbers of machines are being engineered to engage this time. One consequence of this trend is what psychologist Mark Griffiths (1996: 471-472) has called "technological addictions" or "non-chemical (behavioral) addictions which involve human-machine interaction" such as television watching, Internet surfing, video and computer game playing, and slot machine gambling.[1]

At the present time Las Vegas is home to 137,000 gambling devices—machines that take up 75% of casino floor space and generated $7.65 billion in annual revenue in 2000 (Gaming Abstract, 2001).[2] In the past the earning potential of gambling machines in comparison with tables was relatively low, yet in the mid-1980s machine revenue surpassed that of other games and today brings in twice the earnings (ibid), or roughly 75% of casino profits (Rivera 2000; History Channel 2000). By far the most lucrative machines are video poker devices. Although Las Vegas and its gambling activities are most often associated with tourism, in fact video poker is considered a "locals' game." As the resident population steadily rises,[3] so too does the number of locals'-oriented gaming establishments, including casinos, convenience stores, supermarkets, gas stations, and laundromats.[4] In 1984, 32% of Las Vegas residents cited video poker as their preferred game, but in 1998, 54% did (Las Vegas Poll 1999).

Video poker is also the game of choice among problem gamblers[5] and among women. In contrast to Gamblers Anonymous (GA) meetings in Chicago—where participants are almost exclusively men, most of whom have gambled for at least ten years on sports, stock trading, or at the racetrack—in Las Vegas women make up over half of any given GA meeting (Strachen and Custer 1993: 235). It is estimated that women in treatment for problem gambling have gambled for slightly over two years and that well over 95% play video poker exclusively (interview with Dr. Robert Hunter 1999). Although traditional slot machines are associated with older women—"blue hairs," as they are known in the gaming industry[6]—the

profile of the average female compulsive gambler in Las Vegas is a 35-year-old woman with two children (Strachen and Custer 1993: 236). And although traditional slot machines are associated with lower class women, female video poker gamblers in Las Vegas are more often middle class. Regardless of class, the overwhelming majority of women gambling addicts I encountered was employed in the service sector—as indeed was the average Las Vegas resident. They worked in casinos as cocktail and buffet waitresses, "change girls," and card dealers and in real estate, insurance sales, restaurants, social work, and nursing.

This paper emerges from my doctoral dissertation, an ethnographic study of video poker addiction among women in Las Vegas (Schull forthcoming). The dissertation explores the links between gender, the lived experience of addiction, and the increasingly technological circumstances of life in contemporary society. In my research I was particularly fascinated by the relationship between consumer-oriented discourses of choice and autonomy and a rise in unwilled, automatic behaviors such as addiction. To track this relationship I conducted fieldwork at a range of sites including casinos, supermarkets, gaming industry trade shows, and technology laboratories. I regularly attended Gamblers Anonymous meetings as well as group therapy sessions at a clinic for gambling disorders and arranged an internship at a local hospital where a pharmaceutical drug trial for video poker addicts was based.[7] I conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with doctors, counselors, gaming engineers, casino managers, and over 60 female residents who considered themselves addicted to video poker machines.[8] The observations and analysis I present here are based on 30 interviews, all with female video poker gamblers who had at least one child, considered themselves middle class, and were employed in the service sector.

Before I turn to the questions that frame this paper—that is, how women's relational labor at home and at work might shape their gambling behavior and how the gambling technologies they interact with might do the same—I gloss the empirical differences between male and female patterns of gambling and review how these have been made sense of in the literature.

Male vs. Female Gambling: A Critique of the Literature

"The sexes take their chances differently," stated a recent report in the science section of the *New York Times* (O'Neil 2001: F6). Marc Potenza, the featured researcher, found that whereas men prefer sports events or the track, women tend toward bingo and casino games. Whereas men tend toward blackjack, poker, or craps, women are drawn to machines (see also Hing and Breen 2001; Koza 1984; Lesieur and Blume 1991; McLaughlin 2000). Another difference found by Potenza and others is that women tend to be somewhat older than men when they start gambling: Male compulsive gamblers greatly outnumber women up to age 24 and to large extent up to age 34, but this disparity suddenly evens out between the ages of 35 and 44. In the 45 – 64 age range women greatly outnumber men, a disparity that likewise evens out again after 65 (McLaughlin 2000). Female compulsive gambling has also been shown to accelerate at a far more rapid pace than that of male gamblers: "She loses control in three or four years in contrast to male gamblers who may not lose control for ten or more years, typically" (Lorenz 1987: 84).[9] Why these differences? Aside from speculation, the recognition of gender difference in gaming patterns is for the most part unaccompanied by attempts to account for it.

A few researchers in the field of pathological gambling have suggested that existing theories of gambling behavior, because they are based on studies involving predominantly or exclusively male participants, are inadequate to the task of understanding female compulsive gamblers (Lesieur and Blume 1991; Mark and Lesieur 1992; McLaughlin 2000). Excepting Edmund Bergler's psychoanalytic account, in which female gamblers are characterized as "frigid hysteric women who seem to treat gambling as they treat men, coldly and spongingly" (cited in Mark and Lesieur 1992: 553), women have largely been ignored in the literature. They have, however, made occasional appearances as the stereotypically passive, dependent wives of pathological gamblers (ibid.: 552). Excessive gambling, like alcoholism, has been seen as a "male disease."[10]

In "Profile of the Pathological Gambler" Robert Custer (1984)—a psychologist regarded as one of the founding fathers of the problem gambling field—describes the typical gambling addict as a narcissistic, highly intelligent, achievement-oriented, impulsive, hyperactive, and

socially self-confident man. This profile, dominant through the 1980s, persists. Following in the same vein, most physiological and neurobiological research assumes a gambler of high energy level and boredom susceptibility—likely to be suffering from ADHD, some believe—who engages in sensation-seeking behavior (Blaszczynski, McConaghy, and Frankova 1990; Blaszczynski, Wilson, and McConaghy 1986; Coventry and Constable, 1999; Kuley and Jacobs 1988).

Sociological perspectives run parallel to these notions of the typical pathological gambler. Although Erving Goffman (1969) did not explicitly address male experience in his classic text, *Where the Action Is,* like other social-scientific interpretations of gambling, his analysis affirmed the profile of the action-oriented, competitive male gambler. He believed that gambling is by nature a "social situation" of "interpersonal action." Focusing on the collective dynamics of games, Goffman considered gambling a means of engaging in "character contests." He understood machine play, despite the lack of contact with other humans, within the same framework: "[A] person currently without social connections can insert coins in skill machines to demonstrate to the other machines that he has socially approved qualities of character" (270).

In stark contrast to analyses such as those of Custer (1984) and Goffman (1969), female video poker addicts narrate a gambling experience characterized by social isolation and even self-abandonment, in which a sense of body, self, place, and time dissolves. Rather than taking pleasure in the action, energy, sociability, or competition of gambling, they play to disappear, to lose themselves in the devices with which they engage—"machine escape," as many phrased it. When I asked female compulsive gamblers why they preferred machine to tables, the answer was nearly always the same: *I want to be alone*. Maria, a social worker in a local shelter, told me:

> I didn't like to be interrupted after I started to play. I'd put the dollar for the cocktail waitress off to the side so I wouldn't have to break my rhythm to give it to her when she handed me the drink. I couldn't *stand* to have anybody within my *zone;* I got bad vibes from people. Nobody really talks to each other when they're playing video poker machines, so just about anywhere you'd sit you were isolated. That's what I wanted—I didn't want to socialize

with anyone, I wasn't there to make friends, I wasn't there to do anything but just get lost, and that's what I'd do. (interview 1999)

Whether or not men follow Goffman's (1969) model of gambling as a collective activity that facilitates the testing and contesting of one's relation to others—in other words whether or not men turn on their relational capacities in gambling—it appears that women machine gamblers want to turn them off, to disconnect from anything having to do with other people. When hospitality researchers Nerilee Hing and Helen Breen (2001) compared female to male patterns of gambling machine play, they found that females are more likely to play in a way that maximizes *playing time* rather than *winning*; women's aim, in other words, is to prolong the escape. Darlene, a fund raiser for the National Missing Children Locate Center, said, "You're not playing for money; you're playing for credit. Credit so you can sit there longer, which is the goal. It's not about winning; it's about continuing to play. Money isn't the end; it's the means" (interview 1995).

"One wonders," write sociologists Marie Mark and Henry Lesieur (1992: 557) in "A Feminist Critique of Problem Gambling Literature," "what facts and theories about pathological gambling would look like if the principal actors were women rather than men. Would relationship issues and the desire to escape be more prominent than materialism and big egos in gambling theories?" Based on statistical and anecdotal differences between male and female play, some have in fact hypothesized a qualitative split between "action" (or "male") gambling and "escape" (or "female") gambling. Along these lines, Potenza has speculated that men "more often seek ego enhancement through the thrill of competitive risk-taking" whereas women gamble "as a means of escape from distressing problems" (O'Neil 2001: F6). Numerous researchers suggest that women resort to gambling as a coping mechanism to help them forget overwhelming troubles and emotions (Getty, Watson, and Frisch 2000; McLaughlin 2000; Scannell et al. 2000).[11] One woman gambler, Karen, told me:

Women use it more as an escape thing. For men it's a power thing, it's about being a big shot—"look at me, I'm important." It's an ego trip for a man. For a woman it's wanting to get away from a home situation, or the kids, or the stress, or the job, or whatever it may be. I don't think men gamble for that escape (interview 1996).

Robert Hunter, a well-respected pathological gambling clinician in Las Vegas, describes the "prototypical female video poker addict" through the words of Carol O'Hare, a former compulsive gambler who now heads the Nevada Council on Problem Gambling. Video poker, he quotes her as saying, is like the soap commercial in which a woman sinks into a bubble bath with a blissful smile, oblivious to the ring of the phone, the shouted demands of her children, the barking dog: "*Calgon, take me away...*" Like slipping into a warm bath, O'Hare suggests, video poker allows one to slip into a dissociative state that makes the world and all its stresses go away.

Hunter has referred to video poker as "the crack cocaine of gambling" to underscore its potency.[12] This metaphor notwithstanding, some researchers in the field of neurochemistry have shown that whereas a typically "male" or "action" game like craps has an affect on the human brain that resembles the stimulating properties of a drug like cocaine, video poker affects the brain in a manner more resembling the anesthetizing, sedating properties of a drug like morphine. Perhaps, then, "electronic morphine"—a term also coined by Hunter—better conveys the addicting power of video poker.

And so in recent years a female counterpart to the prototypical male pathological gambler has been constructed in the literature. Male and female profiles have been composed out of opposing elements:

male	female
tables	machines
sociability	anonymity
competition	isolation
aim is to win	aim is to play
action	escape
thrill, excitement	relief, forgetting
sensation	dulling of feeling
cocaine	morphine

Although I recognize the demographic, statistical, empirical, and phenomenological differences between male and female patterns of gambling, my own work departs from the assumption implicit in much of the research I have been presenting—that is, the assumption

that these differences are significant because they indicate a fundamental, *natural* disparity between men and women. I am more interested in the significance of these differences as clues to the way in which *social* as well as *technological* conditions might affect behavior. Taking these conditions seriously, as I attempt to do in the remainder of this paper, allows one to develop a nonessentializing understanding of the differences between male and female "styles" of compulsive gambling.

In the next section I explore the links between the desire for the sort of escape offered by gambling machines and social expectations of women as care-takers, at home and at work. Women's accounts of why they gamble with machines not only mirror the profile of the female gambler set forth in the psychological research I have outlined thus far, but also echo cultural ideologies of motherhood and the self, as well as theories of care that have been developed by feminist academics. While these perspectives are radically distinct in certain respects, each perceives the world according to a shared set of assumptions, assumptions that are both symptomatic and productive of capitalist modernity.

Boundary Anxiety: Caretaking and the Self

In *The Managed Heart* Arlie Hochschild (1983: 5) argues that a shift from assembly-line factory work to service sector work has been accompanied by a shift from physical labor to what she calls "emotional labor"—labor in which "the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself." "This labor," she elaborates, "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others…the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place" (7). Although factory labor requires detaching oneself from one's own body, emotional labor as Hochschild outlines it requires detaching oneself from one's own feelings; workers are prone to alienation or estrangement from their emotions, which wear thin as they are processed and managed in the marketplace (11).[13] Some of the flight attendants whom Hochschild interviewed reported periods of emotional deadness: "I wasn't feeling anything. It was like I wasn't really there. The guy was talking. I could hear him. But all I heard was dead words" (187-188). Emotional numbness, she suggests, provides an exit from the situation.

Josie, a life insurance agent, describes how gambling machines facilitate this exit: "While I'm gambling I'm oblivious to the world, to pain. No one can touch me. You die, you really do. As long as I'm down there I don't have to feel. You don't have to feel anything. You're dead. And after that it's so hard to have any kind of emotion; it really is. You don't know where feeling comes from and what to do with it" (interview 1995). In the following passage Josie makes a connection between the emotional numbness she seeks in gambling and the sort of work she performs at her job:

> I work everyday with people. I have to help them with their finances and their scholarships, help them be responsible. I'm selling insurance, selling investments; I'm taking their money; and I've got to put myself in a position where they will believe what I'm selling is true. When I'm in my own little world I don't want to deal with another person. I want to take a vacation from people. With the machine there's no person that can talk back to me, no human contact or involvement or communication, just a little square box, a screen. In the morning instead of getting ready to go to work, I had to stop and put some coins in there, and after I'd get done talking to my clients, I'd have to go to the machines. (ibid.)

Women more than men, Hochschild (1983: 163) claims—particularly middle-class women—"make a resource" out of "the capacity to manage feeling and to do 'relational' work." The women I interviewed in Las Vegas, all of whom worked in service sector jobs, consistently drew associations between the sort of "relational" labor they performed and their escape into gambling machines.

One of the reasons women disproportionately occupy jobs that call for emotional labor, Hochschild (1983: 181) points out, is that they are "schooled in emotional management at home" by virtue of nurturing and managing children: "[B]ecause they are seen as members of the category from which mothers come, women in general are asked to look out for psychological needs more than men are. The world turns to women for mothering, and this fact silently attaches itself to many a job description" (170). In *The Reproduction of Mothering* Nancy Chodorow (1978: 209) develops a feminist psychoanalytical account of the way in which "women's mothering capacities and commitments, and the general psychological capacities and wants which are the basis of women's emotion work, are built

developmentally into feminine personality." Her project is methodologically and interpretively distinct from Hochschild's, yet both scholars are concerned with the processes by which women become positioned as the caretakers of our society and with the consequences of this positioning.

Chodorow (1978: 84) pays particular attention to "a tendency to boundary confusion and a lack of sensed separateness from the world" that attend being female. Nonboundedness and lack of separateness are fundamental to the task of mothering as she understands it: "Theorists of motherhood suggest that good maternal behavior requires a constant delicate assessment of infantile needs and wants and an extreme selflessness." "Just as the child does not recognize the separate identity of the mother, so the mother looks upon her child as a part of herself whose interests are identical with her own" (85, citing Alice Balint). In Chodorow's analysis femininity, which emerges out of mothering, is characterized by fluid and flexible ego boundaries that tend to merge rather than differentiate self from other.[14]

Most feminine roles outside the home, according to Chodorow (1978: 178), replicate mothering in that they entail a "continuous connection to a concern about" others' needs. Foreshadowing Hochschild's sociological insights, Chodorow (ibid.) discerns that "women's work is 'emotion work' in contrast to men's occupational roles which involve less affect and commitment to others." Unlike men's labor, women's labor inside and outside the home is characterized and valued in terms of relationship rather than independence. Despite differences in approach, both Hochschild and Chodorow are committed to grappling with the problematic dynamic between what they perceive as women's strong capacity to relate and to be selfless and their less robust capacity to maintain a coherent, independent self.

Anxieties over this problematic dynamic are echoed in my research interviews. Although the women who spoke with me frequently remarked on the way in which their caretaking behavior disappears when they gamble, surprisingly they did not talk about gambling as a means of asserting a coherent, independent self. Instead they described both caretaking *and* gambling as activities that can bring about a loss of self—in others and in the machine, respectively—and they claim to "use" both activities in a compulsive, escapist manner. Rose, a customer service manager for a telephone company, told me:

> For my whole life I have taken responsibility for whatever happens to anyone. If my daughter calls me and says "I can't go to the beach; it's cloudy," I almost feel responsible for the sun not shining in California. If I can take care of you, I don't have to think about me. When I gamble I can forget about taking care of you, and I don't have to think about me – I can disappear. (interview 1995)

Sandra, a restaurant manager, said, "I've had control all my life over all kinds of things. I was always very responsible, and when my mother died I became everything to my family—everything in the house but a wife to my father. Taking on all the responsibilities was great; I never had to deal with myself" (interview 1998). Josie told me, "I was married a couple of times, had two kids of my own, and have always been in control of taking care of everybody, friends and relatives. Then suddenly here I am talking to the machine, totally out of control of myself… Maybe the two are connected?" (interview 1995). Trina, a waitress, said, "There were so many people dependent on me, I had no sense of self. When I was at the machines all my obligations fell away, and I could fade away" (interview 1999).

Compulsive machine gambling may express the sort of feminine anxiety over loss of self that Chodorow (1978) describes, but clearly it acts out this loss rather than resolving it. If "autonomy"—the ideological counterpoint to the selflessness of care—comes into play in compulsive machine gambling, it does so in the paradoxical sense that women "control" their own loss of self. Darlene comments:

> I feel independent… Some people just don't get it. It's not like when you're competing for a promotion, when other people decide who wins, and you can't get into their minds, can't push their buttons. You can't do anything about it—just sit back and hope and wait. At the machine you may lose, but you're the one pushing the buttons. Instead of just waiting, you're the one controlling the game." (interview 1995)

The sort of autonomy Darlene describes may be a perversion of the very concept—especially given the automatic way in which it is exercised—but as such it is telling of the profound contradictions that exist in our society and in the cultural categories we employ to make sense of them.

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* Sharon Hays (1996) argues that the conflict women in our society experience between selflessness and sustaining an autonomous self arises from discordant cultural imperatives. "The contemporary cultural model of socially appropriate mothering," she claims, "takes the form of an ideology of intensive mothering" in which mothers are advised "to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children" (x).[15] At the same time we live in a society that promotes a cultural model of competitive, impersonal, individualistic, self-maximizing behavior that is at odds with unremunerated caring for others.[16] As Hays sees it, women in our culture are caught between a logic of self-interested gain and a logic of unselfish nurturing.[17] In light of her analysis, we might understand the experience of female gamblers as symptomatic of unresolved tensions surrounding the place of care and autonomy in our society.

The anxieties that run through the narratives of women gamblers—anxieties over the boundaries between self and other, individualism and mothering, work and home—are the same ones that run through ideologies of motherhood and theories of care. Is it possible that these anxieties themselves are intrinsic components of the cultural mindset that accompanies capitalist modernity? Historically, industrial capitalism was dependent on ideals of autonomy and of care; it was also dependent on the ideological split between the two. What Hays (1996) has called the "cultural contradiction" between care and autonomy and mothering is, I believe, not merely a symptom of conflict, but a dynamic binarism that itself constitutes a productive tension of capitalism. Ideologies of care, although seemingly at odds with capitalist economic imperatives, are social formations that were vital to the development of capitalism as an economic mode of governance.

The notion of care as a womanly task and the equation of maternal presence with "good" mothering was an invention of the 19th century specific to middle-class culture and was linked to "new ideas about motherhood and childhood innocence that accompanied industrialization, the American Revolution, and Protestant evangelicalism" (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998: 8). In contrast to the more competitive public role of men, the Victorian ideal of motherhood cast the good mother as self-abnegating, domestic, and "preternaturally

attuned to her children's needs" (7). The mother was protector of the family—itself "a haven in a heartless world," as Christopher Lasch (1995; see also Bellah 1985: 43, 87) described it. In her recent description of the domains of family and work as "competing emotional cultures," Hochschild (2001) leaves one wondering whether she is reporting on new enmeshments of the two or defending their longstanding divide. She writes of the two spheres as coming to invade each other in unnatural ways—work becoming like home (a "surrogate home," as she puts it) and home turning from a place of comfort and relief into a place of stress and demands, Tayloristic practices having "jumped the fence." In a sense her analysis—following from her earlier argument that feelings become distorted when they participate in the marketplace (i.e., emotions don't belong at work)—participates in a very modern, capitalist way of carving up the world.

Some feminists, by reifying ideas of motherhood that naturalize and idealize women's nurturing aptitude, have more straightforwardly contributed to the categorical opposition between care and autonomy that lies at the heart of the capitalist contract. For instance, although the concept of instinctive mother love did not exist in the Western world prior to the 18th century (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998: 6), Sara Ruddick (1980) celebrates "mother love" and "maternal thinking." Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992: 403) has taken issue not only with the psychological literature on maternal bonding and attachment that proposes what she calls a "universal maternal script" but also with feminist literature that proposes an "ethic of care" grounded in maternal responsiveness, attentiveness and caring labor. She questions "the paradigm of an essentialist 'female' psychology itself," insisting that "the 'object relations' that take shape in the womanly experiences of pregnancy, birthing, and early mothering may just as 'naturally' reproduce maternal sentiments of distance and estrangement as of attachment and empathy." Isabella, a real estate agent and single mother who had recently given birth to her first child, illustrates these conflicted sentiments in the following excerpt from her interview:

> I gambled all through my pregnancy. I had no desire to put up with anyone else, so instead of meeting my clients I'd go play machines. I had bad morning sickness, but I didn't notice when I was playing. I got so big I had people

telling me, "You're going to give birth to that baby right here." Up until days before he was born I was sitting in a chair with cigarette smoke for 15, 16, 17 hours. I didn't even take the time to eat. My son would move around; my legs would go numb. I expected to go into labor at the machines. Even right after he was born I couldn't stop. I'd leave him with my sister and go gamble for hours and hours. I was nursing, and one day I went to work but ended up at the casino instead; there were stains all the way down to my hips from the leaking of my breasts. That didn't even stop me; I didn't know it was happening.

With my son crying and wanting to nurse all the time… although it's a wonderful feeling, it takes a while to get used to—it's not my body anymore; it belongs to him. There have been other times in my life when it wasn't my body, but I fought hard to get it back—"No, this is my space; you can't come here." But then he comes along, and all of a sudden it's not my body anymore: He's hungry, he wants to nurse, and that's it. My body's saying, "bye, see ya" because it's all coming out. I mean even if I said I'm not doing it anymore, my breasts are saying "yes you are." I didn't have any space; I didn't have any privacy; nothing was mine anymore; I hated coming home. I'd go gamble, and it would all be gone, totally gone. I was safe and away. (interview 1999)

Trina is another of the numerous women I spoke with who had gambled while pregnant: "I'd stand up from the machines and realize I'd been really uncomfortable sitting there but didn't even notice because my mind was so focused on that machine and those cards. While I was there I didn't think about the baby in my stomach, the children at home, the fact that I had snuck out of the house…" (interview 1999).

Gamblers like Isabella and Trina express a significant degree of ambivalence around the "womanly experiences" of which Scheper-Hughes (1992) writes. Because these experiences—such as intercourse, orgasm, pregnancy, birthing, nursing, feeding, and mothering—all involve relating to, interacting with, and caring for others, they challenge cultural ideals of a discrete, coherent self and generate "boundary anxiety." The gamblers with whom I spoke describe how video poker machines function to mediate the loss of bodily and psychic self boundaries—a loss from which they seek to escape and yet also seek to mechanically induce in their gambling encounters. In effect through video poker gambling these women substitute a mechanical dependency for a maternalism with which they cannot cope.

The Female Machine Gambler as Anti-mother

According to Tsing (1990), stories of bad mothering are especially compelling cautionary tales given the current climate of anxiety surrounding the place of women in society. The women who figure in these stories are portrayed as violating socially sanctioned tenets of care. As the editors of the collected volume *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America* write in their introduction, the "cipher of bad mother stands in for" serious problems in our society (Ladd-Taylor and Umansky 1998: 23).[18] The *New York Times* report that opens this paper captures the image of the female gambling addict as bad mother. Although women are expected to be relational creatures, social beings attentive to the needs of others, those who gamble excessively invest in machines to the point where they stop investing in their relationships. Undermining culturally valued aspects of "femininity," they become nonnurturing—stay out all night, leave young children home alone, fail to breastfeed, squander their children's savings, and so forth.

Some pathological gambling research echoes media portrayals of the woman machine addict as "fallen mother":

> The family is totally unprepared for the changes in her behavior. The once responsible, loving woman suddenly becomes a changed woman—someone who stays out at night, spends money recklessly, lies at every opportunity, and argues much of the time. Children and husband are left to fend for themselves because she no longer tends to the home or her family. (Lorenz 1987: 84)[19]

A recent study set in Australia—where, the authors tell us, "women are still generally the child's primary caregiver"—claims that children are put at risk by the rising numbers of women developing gambling problems. They note that the dramatic increase in quantity and availability of electronic gaming machines or 'pokies' "has helped to 'feminize' problem gambling" (Darbyshire, Oster and Carrig 2001: 25). The "perception among the authors" was that "there did seem to be some difference in the nature and extent of [children's] loss and distress experience related to whether it was their mother or father who had the gambling problem" (ibid.). Their perception, in other words, is that children suffer more when their *mother* is the parent with the gambling problem.

The suffering of children, they write, is characterized by a "pervasive" sense of loss—loss of the parental relationship, trust, material goods, and the meaning of "home, as a powerful metaphor for safety, security and belonging" (Darbyshire, Oster and Carrig 2001: 39-40).[20] Loss, the authors point out, is both physical (the absence of the gambling parent) and existential. Children are negatively affected by "the unpredictable, frequent, and physical leaving of the parent, who seems to have discovered something more valuable and important than their children and home" (33). Children "described their parent as having become deceptive, unreliable, irresponsible, irrational, uninterested and selfish … the chilling perception [was] that their parent no longer really loved or cared about them" (34-35):

> As the gambling parent's center of gravity shifted more toward gambling, their children lost the elemental aspects of the relationship that a child should enjoy with the parent, the sense of being loved and valued, the feeling of being cared for and cared about, the security of knowing that you are your parent's top priority. At its most extreme, this "abandonment" by a parent can take the form of the much-publicized scenario where a parent leaves their child in a car while they go to gamble, sometimes with tragic results. (41-42)

Another place where one encounters stories of women gamblers as bad mothers is in supermarkets. When I spoke with M. in the video poker department of Smith's grocery store where she had worked for nine years, she told me that she didn't like women who play with their children along: "One woman comes in regularly at three in the morning with her four children in tow, ages seven to eleven. They go into the store to buy things, or sit on the bench and yell at their mother. One of the boys has rheumatoid arthritis and some days he can hardly walk" (interview 1998). J., who works in the video poker department at Lucky's, watched one woman buy a whole cart of groceries, lose everything she had, return all the food, and put that money in the machines, too. People are not allowed to have their children with them waiting while they play, she tells me, but they do it anyway (interview 1998).

In their own narratives women who gamble represent *themselves* as bad mothers. Micaela, a travel agent, told me: 'I was always obsessive-compulsive about my kids. I took care of them to fill my time, but then I transferred that to television and housecleaning and gambling at the expense of neglecting them. After my daughter was killed I gambled away

my grandson's entire inheritance playing the machines—it was the only time I could forget about her death" (interview 1998). Josie said, "I haven't really been doing things that I'm supposed to be doing as a mom. I've been neglecting responsibilities and neglecting my work, neglecting my daughter and my boyfriend because I'm hooked up with this machine" (interview 1995). Cathy, a nurse told me:

> I used to be such an involved mother: I made cookies for school, sang in the choir, taught Sunday school. But I wasn't being a mom when I gambled—it all went away. At the machine it took two minutes to disappear, to forget, to not feel. It was a wonderful way to alter my reality—an immediate mood shifter. I thought it was a great coping skill, but it was a coping *mechanism,* and the more I used it the more I vacated my life. I even cashed in my life insurance for more money to play. I thought I was the only woman in the whole city doing what I'd been doing. I didn't know it was an addiction. My husband was an alcoholic, and I self-righteously told him, "I refuse to raise my children in a home with an addict." But my children's lives were permanently altered by my own behavior. (interview 2001)

Trina had this to say: "I was a decent, honest person before the gambling, so I don't know how it happened that I could just completely block out all my responsibilities to the people who depended on me" (interview 1999).

In media accounts, psychological literature, and the narratives of gamblers themselves, the female machine addict is described as diametrically opposed to the good mother:

good mother	machine addict
attentive	neglectful
nurturing	selfish
responsive	irresponsible
investing	divesting
secure/safe	risk-taking
relating to others	isolated
connected	alone
present	absent

What this set of opposing traits fails to recognize is that in relation to the *machine* women conduct themselves according to the tenets of motherhood listed in the left column. This

is something that gamblers do recognize. As Darlene puts it, "You can't leave the machine; you're attached. You don't pay attention to what's going on around you. You don't even know. You are not there. You are with the machine and that's all you're with. I wouldn't go to the bathroom or eat or do anything but play that machine" (interview 1995). This extreme "devotion" suggests that these women have not lost the capacity to act in caretaking ways, but that their caretaking has been redirected from child, family, home, and work to the machine—exclusively and totally.

Is it accurate to speak of the bond that exists between woman and machine as a "relationship"? If a relationship is what takes place between two subjects, then clearly the answer is no. Yet gamblers frequently experience the machine as a subject. Josie, for instance, described how she "feeds" the machine, "invests" in it, even "dances" with it. "Breaking off with the machine," she said, "is just as difficult as breaking up a relationship with a person" (interview 1995). It is not just that women "mother" the machine; the machine in turn "cares" for them. Darlene said: "Sometimes you need somebody to control you—just to let you know that you're wanted, that you're loved" (interview 1995).

In her recent work on "intimate machines" Sherry Turkle (2001a, 2001b) claims that designers have "caught up" with the experiential aspects of technology, taking into account its "connective" and "emotional" potential and constructing "relational artifacts" for humans to interact with.[21] Along similar lines I argue that gambling machines have been programmed to *care*. Video poker's structural characteristics grant them an incredibly effective "holding power" (Turkle 2001b), especially in relation to who experience anxiety over their self-boundaries in relation to others.

Escape Mechanism: The "Holding Power" of Video Poker

Pathological gambling researcher Durand Jacobs (1997) conceptualizes addictive substances and activities as "vehicles that are chosen to carry the individual away from a painful reality." Why do women chose machines as their escape vehicle? Some have suggested that while men have a culture of gambling that grants them access to "a wide range of gambling activities from the stock exchange to horse racing," along with "the

accompanying image of individualistic risk taker, innovator and speculator," women "have been expected to follow more feminine, nurturing, less publicly speculative roles" (Hing and Breen 2001: 50). Pointing to the lack of alternative escape mechanisms, they argue that gambling machines allow women an exit from boredom and a way to gain "time out" from family responsibilities in nonthreatening environments where they can be alone yet "safe alone" (65). Surely the stigma of more social forms of gambling contributes to video poker being women's game of choice (Lesieur and Blume 1991: 56), yet there is sufficient evidence to indicate that there is more to the "choice" than that.

Robert Hunter explains that video poker is a game medium that allows just the sort of absorption, narrowing of attention, and numbing of peripheral awareness that blurs reality and enables dissociative escape—an escape that is particularly appealing, he says, to those seeking distraction from life problems:

> The primary attraction from day one for video players is escape. They want to sit in the corner and hope nobody notices them. With video poker you can get lost, block out external stimuli, climb into the screen; you don't have to attend to things going on around you, and there isn't a sensation of time passing. Nor are there appropriate reactions to environmental events; late stage players literally don't care if the building's on fire. I've had many patients over the years who have piercing physical events that they're not aware of while gambling—going into labor, for example. Other forms of gambling are not as perfect as video poker; you can't as easily block out the rest of world and not attend to anything else**.** The consistency of the experience that's described is that of numbness or escape—video players don't talk about excitement; they talk about going to the twilight zone. (interview 1999)

Gambling machines, it seems, have the capacity to deliver a certain kind of relief, to excuse women from *relating*—to others, to themselves, to the world.

The fact that women compulsive gamblers "lose control" more quickly than men may or may not correlate with an innate propensity to become addicted more easily; what it *does* attest to is the greater addictiveness of the games women find appealing. Lending support to this idea, a recent study of women gamblers found there to be "no significant relationship between control over gambling and age, employment, relationship status, education or

distress from significant life events. Control over gambling was, however, significantly related to duration and frequency of poker machine playing" (Scannell et al. 2000: 428). Video poker machines, a small number of studies suggests, are so addictive because they maximize features that promote persistence of play (Morgan et al. 1996).[22]

As Griffiths (1996: 473) speculates, "[S]tructural characteristics (i.e. features which manufacturers design into their products) promote interactivity and to some extent define alternative realities to the user and allow them feelings of anonymity—features which may be very psychologically rewarding to [certain] individuals." Some of these features include:

? immediate reinforcement, coupled with nonaversive auditory and visual cues

? frequent near-misses and small wins, with less frequent larger wins

? variable level of betting, coupled with the illusion of skill, promoting an illusion of control over the stimulus and outcome

? a waging cap that tends to prolong play and thus promotes the illusion of competency

? the option of credit play as opposed to stopping with money in hand

(Morgan et al. 1996: 453)

Griffiths (1999: 268) draws our attention to the highly effective "reinforcement schedule" of gaming technologies—a variable and random schedule that exploits the psychological principles of learning outlined by B.F. Skinner in his theory of operant conditioning. Griffiths stresses the importance of "event frequency"—the number of opportunities one has to gamble in a given time period. With video poker, the temporal gap between gambles is potentially incredibly small; some players can complete up to 15 games a minute, which translates into 900 games per hour. Rapid continuous replay, he points out, "means that the loss period is brief with little time given over to financial considerations and, more importantly, winnings can be re-gambled almost immediately." Technology designers have developed a nuanced sense of how to modulate technology to accommodate gamblers' "zoning rhythm." For instance, when video poker machines got too slow for experienced

players, a new version was engineered to adapt to each player's speed (interview with Stacey 1999). Other properties that contribute to video poker's appeal include light and color effects, sound effects such as buzzers or musical tunes to indicate winning, the advertised probability of winning, and the size of the jackpot (Griffiths 1999).

Designers of gambling technology spend a great deal of time engineering machines that will effectively "comfort" and respond to players in order to coax their continued play. To increase the physical comfort of those "who typically spend hours seated" at them, machine seats are engineered to "eliminate hard, sharp edges coming in contact with the main arteries of the legs, which causes circulation to be cut and the legs to fall asleep" (Legato 1987: 15). The bodies of most machines are equipped to accept player cards; upon insertion, the player is greeted with the flashing of a cheery, personalized message on the machine's digital face—"Hi [name of gambler]! Nice to see you!" A win elicits an immediate response of "congratulations," and players are constantly wished "good luck." As a casino manager noted, "People love it. You give them their own card and let them know they are special" (staff writer, 1985: 13).

Conclusions

One theory that has been enlisted to explain female compulsive gambling is the "empty nest hypothesis"—the idea that older women whose children have grown and left the home experience a deficit of care and caring for.[23] While this is no doubt the case in many instances, I have been suggesting something different in this working paper, something more like "a nest that's too full." Despite Chodorow's claim that women fear isolation whereas men fear engulfment, my research shows that in our present society women too flee from engulfment. For women saddled with an excess of caretaking responsibilities at home and at work, machines offer a mechanical relief from the realm of others' demand, as well as from the equally fraught realm of autonomy. Although women may cultivate an intimate relation with the machine, their play aims above all at a total disconnection from the human, including themselves.

Many of the differences between male and female patterns of compulsive gambling are showing themselves to be mutable social facts rather than sex determined. As increasing numbers of men play video poker machines—it is estimated that in Las Vegas two-thirds of male compulsive gamblers prefer video poker, and this number is rising (Strow 1999)—the stereotype of "man the dice roller" and "woman the machine escapist" is rapidly losing ground. This shift challenges prototypical models of male and female gamblers, suggesting that video poker is not "naturally" a female game, but one that women in our society have been drawn to for various reasons, including their caretaking responsibilities, as I have argued in this paper. The fact that men in Las Vegas are increasingly playing machines[24] is the product, no doubt, of multiple forces: a waning of gender stereotypes for game preference, the fact that women are no longer the only ones who need and find this form of escape, and an environment saturated with technologies that appeal to this need.

Although the environment of Las Vegas is unique in the degree to which it makes appeals to human desire, and although the case of compulsive machine gambling is singular, I believe both are telling of some of the more general dilemmas of contemporary American life, particularly the fraught relationship between a cultural ideal of autonomy and the increasingly automated conditions of American consumer culture.

* * *

A century ago the news report that opened this paper, rather than focusing solely on the fatal neglect of the mother, might have included reflections on the larger ethical question of gambling and its availability. The fact that today politicians commonly invoke the legalization of gambling as an economic remedy for recession illustrates that gambling and social welfare are no longer diametrically opposed in the public imagination, but have become intimately linked. Religious and secular indictments of gambling's pernicious effects have shifted to a view of "gaming" as entertainment. As such, the activity is comfortably accommodated within a neoliberal rhetoric of consumer culture that emphasizes the "free choice" of self-governing individuals. This deregulatory language tends to elide the civic and ethical considerations behind the nationwide rise in gambling addictions. In the context of

what can be called "moral privatization," excessive gambling is no longer regarded as a social ill to be eliminated through collective surveillance, but rather is medicalized as a psychiatric disorder genetic in origin and treatable with psychotropic drugs.[25] The shift in perception of excessive gambling from social crisis to personal problem signals a growing belief that the solution is to be sought from doctors rather than policymakers. As the state retreats, responsibility is placed on the shoulders of individuals who are blamed for lacking self-control.

In contrast to an understanding of excessive gambling as "pathology" or poor exercise of "free choice," here I have argued that the gaming industry, by designing consumer technologies that capitalize on potent cultural anxieties, is implicated in the phenomenon of machine addiction among women.

Notes

1. According to Griffiths such addictions include the characteristic components of addiction—salience, euphoria, tolerance, withdrawal, conflict, and relapse (472).

2. The national gross annual revenue for all forms of gaming in the year 2000 was $61.3 billion—more than consumers spent on movies, recorded music, theme parks, spectator sports, and video games combined. This figure is a striking jump from 1990 when the total was $26.6 billion (American Gaming Organization 2002).

3. From 1990 to 2000 the area's population ballooned 62 %, the largest gain for any U.S. metropolitan area. Today 1.3 million people live in southern Nevada (Wagner 2002).

4. A study of Las Vegas resident's gambling behavior during 1997-1998 showed that 73% gambled "at least occasionally" while 47% did so at least once a week (down from 55% in 1995) (GLS Research 1998).

5. The Las Vegas Poll at the Howard Cannon Survey Research Center indicates that at least 6.6 % of Las Vegas residents are pathological or problem gamblers and that more than half of those living in the city know at least one person with a gambling problem (Strow 1999).

6. At the headquarters of Anchor Gaming—a major supplier of local gaming technology (and the sole supplier of video poker in grocery stores)—John, a designer, voiced this stereotype in terms of niche marketing: "You must know your customer, and ours is a 50-year-old female" (interview 2000).

7. Most of my informants were in treatment for their excessive gambling. It was difficult to identify and approach gamblers outside of therapeutic spaces. This research constraint necessarily "skews" my findings.

8. Fieldwork was conducted during preliminary trips to Las Vegas in 1993 and 1995 and 18 months of continuous research between 1998 and 2000.

9. Further differences between men and women have been noted in the literature: Whereas men borrow from bookmakers and loan sharks, women deplete their credit (McLaughlin 2000; O'Neil 2001), and women tend to engage in more overeating and overspending or "retail therapy" (Lesieur and Blume 1991: 59; McLaughlin 2000).

10. As Valerie Lorenz (1987: 71) notes, "[U]ntil the 1970s [pathological gambling] appeared to affect only white, middle-aged, middle-class businessmen, who were more often Jewish than Catholic or Protestant, married, and the father of three children. Typically, the gamblers wager on horse races, cards, commodities or options, or casino games."

11. Some researchers, citing evidence that women compulsive gamblers have remarkably troubled childhoods, marriages, and adult lives, speculate that their gambling behavior is a reaction to a history of abuse, trauma, and loss (Getty, Watson, and Frisch 2000; Lesieur and Blume 1991; McLaughlin 2000). Others propose that escape gamblers have a physiological propensity to experience negative, depressive inner states and seek to alleviate this through gambling. Still others hypothesize that they have maladaptive coping styles, or a coping skills "deficit," and use gambling as an "avoidance mechanism" (e.g. see Getty, Watson and Frisch 2000; Scannell et al. 2000).

12. Hunter elaborates: "There's addiction, and there's addiction. There's 3.2 % beer, and everclear. The order of increasing intensity as far as gambling is concerned is lottery, bingo, slots, sports/horses, cards/dice, and video poker" (interview 1999).

13. In the early 1980s, at the time Hochschild's book was written, about one-half of all women had jobs that called for emotional labor (9).

14. In *Habits of the Heart* sociologist Robert Bellah (1985: 56-57) and his collaborators notice that "issues of separation and individuation" are "recurrent themes in the lives of Americans, and few if any of us ever leave them entirely behind," suggesting that what Chodorow identifies as a characteristically feminine issue may in fact be endemic to a culture that "emphasizes the autonomy and self-reliance of the individual."

15. Barrie Thorne (1999: 14) has described our notion of child rearing as a "caring project" that involves a "keen awareness of the here and now," an attentiveness to child's life.

16. In *Habits of the Heart* Bellah (1985) and his collaborators explore the growing prominence of the language of "utilitarian individualism" among white, middle-class Americans and the way in which social life is increasingly perceived and talked about as if it unfolded according to the self-maximizing behavior of *homo economicus*.

17. Hays notices that the contradiction is particularly fraught given that over half of all mothers with young children work outside the home. She argues that the ideology of intensive mothering persists in a world that values self-interest not only because it serves the interests of "capitalism, the state, the middle-class, and whites," but also "because it holds a fragile but nonetheless powerful cultural position as the last best defense against what many people see as the impoverishment of social ties, communal obligations, and unremunerated commitments" (xiii).

18. Annalee Newitz (1998: 335) writes that "we are trying to live without motherhood as we have known it. Mainstream conceptions of motherhood are undergoing violent transformation. As more women enter the workplace as professionals and skilled laborers… we find it increasingly difficult to pinpoint what a 'good' mother would be."

19. Like other literature on female gambling, this piece assumes that all women with children have husbands.

20. "Perhaps the most painful aspect of financial loss for the children," the authors write, "was when their parent had become so desperate for gambling money that they had stolen or 'borrowed' money from their children's saving or other funds" (40).

21. In her most recent work (2001a, 2001b) Turkle looks at children's toys like "Furbies," which are designed to create "connective emotional experiences" for children by demanding to be cared for. The "holding power" of being asked to nurture is highly effective, she argues, citing the film *AI*, in which a robot child offers a human mother perfect love.

22. Elsewhere I discuss more comprehensively the design principles that make video poker so captivating, along with the management and marketing practices that accompany the game (Schull forthcoming).

23. An alternate finding is that older women view their gambling as a reward for years spent parenting (Thomas cited in Hing and Breen 2001: 53).

24. M., a change person at Smith's supermarket video poker department, narrated the following story: "A man had two kids, ages two and three, running around the store with no shoes. Employees kept bringing them back, but they'd climb out of the cart again and be off. The man kept promising to leave, but he didn't—he was oblivious to what was going on around him. The little one ran out into the parking lot, and I threatened to call the police. I told him, 'Go home and get a babysitter. I'll hold your machine for you'" (interview 1998).

25. In 1980 the American Psychiatric Association adopted "pathological gambling" as part of its official diagnostic nosology, listing it under Impulse Control Disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.*

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