Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas by Natasha Dow Schüll (review)

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where the concept of modernity is concerned, the conclusions do not fully do justice to the rich study that precedes them. Lachmund provides nice materials for thinking about the nature of urban modernity, but the term modernity is not defined clearly, nor are his arguments here as clearly articulated.

Greening Berlin’s appearance in MIT’s Inside Technology series is significant because there is almost no technology discussed here. This suggests the breadth, scope, and interdisciplinary drift of the series as a leading site for conceptual innovation. Of central interest to T&C readers is Lachmund’s use of the popular term “co-production.” Scholars of envirotech will appreciate his claim that urban nature is produced through human activity, while historians of all stripes will appreciate his feel for contingency and the importance of place.

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Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas.


Based on fifteen years of ethnographic work, Addiction by Design is an ambitious and thought-provoking book that challenges the neoliberal ethos currently governing the way in which governments and professionals think about gambling addiction. This ethos frames gamblers as consumers who can choose to gamble responsibly with the help of experts and good business practices. Problem gamblers, by extension, are a minority who exhibit a psychological affinity toward addiction. On the contrary, Natasha Schüll argues that addiction is not an internalized psychological state of the individual, but a result of the interaction between humans and machines. This relationship is interdependent but not symmetrical. Thus, while slot machines are designed to place the gambler in a state of “continuous productivity” in order to extract maximum value from extended periods of play, gamblers seek out these machines in order to enter a self-liquidating psychosomatic state (the “zone”) which is an end in itself. This perverse relationship of “asymmetrical collusion” reveals itself only at the end when the gambler’s funds are depleted. The machine becomes inert and unresponsive, and the gambler is forced to economize on real life in order to re-enter the zone.

The book is divided into four sections which build up this concept of “asymmetrical collusion” from different perspectives. In the first two sections, Schüll examines how various experts design environments and tech-
nologies to maximize “time-on-device.” Moving from the casino floor to the slot machine to its internal mechanisms, Schüll reveals the strategies whereby designers create immersive environments that draw gamblers and encourage them to play for long, uninterrupted periods of time. She traces a continual feedback loop, akin to operant conditioning, whereby designers modify machines to give what gamblers want, while gamblers develop “machine tolerance” that provokes further innovations. Some of these insights seem to be presaged by popular myths, but Schüll is the first to have marshaled substantial empirical and ethnographic data to reveal the role of the industry in shaping gambling habits, including addiction.

In the last two sections, Schüll turns her attention to the addicts. Rather than treating them as passive victims in need of therapy, she reveals in rich ethnographic detail the inner struggles of these people. Her ethnographic account shines here, showing us how intensive machine gambling both suspends and refracts key elements of contemporary capitalist society. Thus, the demands of calculative rationality do not dissipate in the “zone.” Rather, the exercise of choice and control, distilled and formatted by digital technology, becomes the very medium of compulsion. In another twist to conventional wisdom, Schüll’s ethnography of an addiction therapy group shows how recovery and addiction share similar assumptions and practices, to the extent that the serene state of self-control exercised through therapy becomes very similar to the suspended state of the machine zone.

Schüll poses many questions to the professionalization of addiction. She convincingly shows that culpability cannot be isolated to individuals, but is shared among all who play a role in the business of commercialized gambling. Her reflexive stance is welcome in an industry that is often highly defensive. But Schüll’s relationships with her diverse informants are not evenly explicated. She seems most sympathetic with the gamblers, whose narratives figure prominently in her arguments. Suspicions are not raised as to the kinds of misrepresentations that might mediate the ethnographer-informant relationship. With the industry experts, Schüll is also sometimes insufficiently critical. For example, she relies primarily on the works of Bill Friedman to draw out the principles of casino design. Yet Friedman represents only one school of thought that is currently heavily contested. Professionals tend to aggrandize their roles in this highly competitive industry.

Though the stories of addicts who play themselves into bankruptcy and cardiac arrests might seem a case in the extreme, *Addiction by Design* provides sobering insights into the machine-mediated world that we all inhabit. Throughout the book, Schüll connects her ethnographic observations to larger debates on contemporary capitalism, in particular the neoliberal ethos of self-regulating subjects and the capitalization of con-
sumers’ affective capacities. By traveling deep into the hitherto hidden bowels of the Las Vegas gambling industry, we begin to recognize disturbing everyday scenes when we tune into our laptops, iPods, and Facebook accounts.

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Recoding Gender: Women’s Changing Participation in Computing.

The first time I heard that computing was once mostly done by women, I thought the speaker must be mistaken. I entered the world of computer science in 1978 and I certainly didn’t see many women around me then. Furthermore, I knew women whose computer science careers were already well established in 1978, and I had never heard any of them mention an earlier, vanished utopian era in which women ruled computing. There wasn’t much of a field of computer science before that so this information simply did not compute. Soon after, I learned that when digital computers were first developed, women were employed as programmers, mainly because people mistakenly assumed that programming was rote work much like typing or filing. “Oh!” I said. I felt a sinking disappointment as belief sank in.

“Many people are surprised that women have a long history in computing,” states Janet Abbate in the very first sentence of Recoding Gender. That is certainly true, and I am one of those people despite having spent my career in computing and its applications. This book explores the untold history of women in computer science and programming, starting from the Second World War when most programmers were women, to the current day in which women have become significantly underrepresented in this field. While Abbate’s primary goal is historical, she also aims to influence current policy to address underrepresentation.

The experiences of these early programmers are described in their own words in chapter 1, “Breaking Codes and Finding Trajectories: Women at the Dawn of the Digital Age.” The excitement and good times they recounted were evocative of my college days when I first learned to program. Programming was just flat-out fun. In discovering the world that one could create within the computer, I felt a bit like Alice falling through the looking glass to discover another reality. On the flip side, in chapter 4, “Female Entrepreneurs,” the challenge described by the women entrepreneurs of dressing to achieve the right balance between professional image and feminine identity is all too familiar.