



*Playing roulette in Puerto Rico, 1949*

# THE JOY OF GAMBLING

BY DAVID SPANIER

The action is everything, more consuming than sex, more immediate than politics, more important always than the acquisition of money.

—Joan Didion, *The White Album*

What if you met a man in a bar this evening, after you quit work for the day, and he said (as people sometimes do), "Hey, let's toss a coin for a dollar, heads or tails."

"Right here in front of everybody?"

"Why not?"

"Okay," you might say, if you were in that sort of mood. "Let's go for it!"

But then the man adds: "Just one little thing about this toss I want to explain before we start. When I win, you lose your dollar. When you win, I'll pay you only 99 cents."

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It's not all that different, is it, one penny on the toss? But you would be out of your mind to take on such a proposition, wouldn't you? Especially if your spouse or, worse, your employer, happened to be watching. You would be marked down as an idiot if you couldn't handle your money any better. A dollar to 99 cents. Why do it? It makes no sense.

But that is exactly what all of us do when we gamble, when we cross the threshold between workaday life and the fantasy realm of a casino. In fact, if the house gets only one percent of an edge or advantage (as in certain bets at dice), gamblers consider it a good bet. If they can get even money, one for one on their stake, they think it's great value, as in certain bets at dice.

**I** have a confession to make, right at the start. I am not a gambler. Not any more, that is. I have learned the hard way, as most of us do, that you cannot beat the laws of probability.

On my first visit to Las Vegas, as a freshman on vacation from Cambridge University, I came prepared with a system for roulette. My idea was to wait for a series of reds or blacks to come up, six in a row, and then start betting on the other color, doubling up after each losing spin until I hit a winner. So after six reds, say, I would start betting black: \$1, then \$2, \$4, \$8, \$16, \$32, \$64, \$128. For the system to lose, the same color would have to come up 15 times in a row, which seemed highly unlikely. My only anxiety, as I recall, was that the initial run of six consecutive reds or blacks would take such a long time to appear that I might get bored waiting.

I need not have worried. After a couple of hours logging the wheel, I was ready to launch my system. The first spin went down, the next spin went down, and the next, and the next, with terrifying speed, as red kept repeating. Suddenly, like a flash of light striking a philosopher, the realization penetrated my fevered brow. This particular roulette wheel did not give a damn about me and my

pathetic hopes of fortune. It was oblivious to the fact that I had traveled 7,000 miles across an ocean and most of a continent to test my luck. If I was to follow my system, I had to bet \$256 on the next spin. I also had six weeks of summer vacation to pay for. The croupier was eyeing my precarious tower of chips like an explosives expert about to dynamite a building. I pulled back—just in time.

Nearly everyone makes this mistake in gambling, which is to confuse the short-term outcome with long-term probability. On every individual spin, the probability of red or black is the same, 50:50. And over a million spins, reds and blacks will virtually even out (ignoring zeros). But within that series, there will be many short-term fluctuations on either side. Fourteen reds in a row is no big deal.

It is good to learn this lesson young. When I go to Las Vegas now, I don't even see the slot machines. I feel almost guilty—considering the immense and multifarious efforts the casinos make to tempt the visitor to gamble—that I do not spend a dime on casino games. My passion lies elsewhere. I play poker, a game of skill, albeit with a big gambling element in it. What I like is the ambience of gambling, particularly casino gambling, with its day-into-night and night-into-day sense of anything-goes-and-here-it-comes release from the conventions of ordinary life.

**E**veryone takes chances, every day, although people do not consciously classify the process as gambling. Every time you drive, every time you buckle up in an airplane seat, one might say every time you cross the road, the risk is there. These are unavoidable risks in the modern world and, for most people, so habitual as not to be worth worrying about. *Che sera sera*. These days, there is danger in riding the subway, danger in visiting New York's World Trade Center, danger even in visiting a government building in Oklahoma City, let alone in traveling abroad.

Other sorts of risks, such as those inher-

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ent in active sports such as skiing, mountaineering, horseback riding, sailing, and football, are more easily avoided. The pleasure of doing it is what gets people involved. That pleasure far outweighs any vestigial concern about something going wrong. Besides, regardless of the sport, everyone involved has had at least a degree of initial training to prepare himself or herself and to guard against accidents. The odds of coming through safely are tilted well in your favor.

**E**ven in matters of investment, such as taking out a life insurance policy, which means, in effect, betting on your own longevity, the gamble is a studied risk, founded on actuarial tables and the prudent desire to protect your family. The insurance company, working on the past record of hundreds of thousands of instances, calculates the probability of a particular misfortune befalling the applicant, and sets its premium accordingly, adding a healthy margin to cover operating costs and allow for a profit.

The insurance companies are not really gambling themselves, because they are operating on the basis of statistics that virtually guarantee them a positive return. Yes, but then we remember Lloyd's of London. Even the best-regulated risks sometimes come unstuck. I think it was James Thurber who observed: "There is no safety in numbers; there is no safety anywhere."

Casino gambling is risk taking in its purest form. The participants willingly and deliberately get involved, knowing the chances are not in their favor. No one has to do it. All players are aware that the odds are against them. The odds are set out in all the books, even in government reports on gambling. The question is: why do people still do it?

It may seem a paradox to insist that

money is not what gambling is about. Of course, money is the essence of gambling and the way you keep score. Games of chance without money involved simply do not work. And you cannot gamble in a casino without money. Money is the fuel of gambling; it drives it, as gasoline powers a car. But the pleasure of driving a car is not about gas. It's about speed, style, movement. Gas is only what makes the car run. In that sense, the real motives behind gambling are to be sought elsewhere.

Play, the enjoyment of play, is a part of human nature. It is an instinct as old as the sex drive, as powerful as hunger and thirst, as basic to the human condition as survival. Gambling is a heightened form of play. That is why so many people like gambling, and spend so much money on it, not just all over the United States now that the brakes are off but in virtually all societies in the modern world.

The appeal of gambling, to my mind, is in the *action*. The phrase "where the action is" derives from Damon Runyon's story, "The Idyll of Miss Sarah Brown" (1947), which celebrates the exploits of gambler Sky Masterson. The immortal Sky Masterson got his name, you may remember, because he liked to bet so high, on any proposition whatever, that he would bet all he had. "The Sky is strictly a player. . . . As far as The Sky is concerned, money is just something for him to play with and the dollars may as well be doughnuts as far as value goes with him."

Action expresses, in a word, the whole gambling experience. It means playing with chance, taking a challenge, the excitement of living in top gear. In gambling, this is the payoff. In our routinized urban lives, most of us are cogs in the wheel of work, taxes, and social and family obligations. Gambling offers a fast way out. On the green baize, or

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at the track, or at a lottery terminal, the player can give self-indulgence a whirl, briefly cast responsibility aside, and fantasize about a brighter, richer, easier life. It is not, in reality, going to work out like that. But some people do win, don't they? In lotteries, almost unimaginable sums of money.

**H**ere it is useful to distinguish different forms of gambling by the payoffs they offer: long-term versus short-term; degrees of social gratification; profit and loss. Each kind of gamble offers its own appeal.

First, the long-shot gamble, as in lotteries. In terms of odds, of many millions to one against winning, lotteries are a bad gamble. Their appeal, which certainly elicits a deep response across a huge swath of the population, lies in the prospect of acquiring superstar wealth, as if the finger of fate were suddenly to reach out and touch one lucky person. All of this can be purchased for a very small price. For a period before the draw—it may be just a few minutes, or may last for days—people can daydream about what they would do with the money. And why not? It is a harmless enough little dream, which can lighten dull lives. Lottery players know that only one winner will make it big. What their purchase of a ticket gives them is a little spoonful of hope, which, like honey, is pleasing while it lasts.

Experience shows that lotteries tend to exploit low-income sectors of the population. Besides being least able to afford this kind of spending, which is of course an indirect form of taxation, such people tend to be most vulnerable to the lottery promoters' blandishments. Indeed, what may be most troubling about lotteries are slogans like "Your way out of the ghetto" and other enticements used by state agencies to attract bettors.

A great deal of gambling, at the popular level, is geared to a short-term thrill. This is what casinos offer. Unlike with lotteries, the odds seem within reach. Casino gamblers look down on lotteries because the

odds are too long to offer a practical expectation of gain, whereas slot machines, dice, blackjack, and roulette can provide an immediate return. At a fast-moving game of roulette, there may be more than 60 coups an hour: a slot machine, without the intermediary of a dealer or croupier, or any need for know-how on the part of the player, offers perhaps five or six coups per minute. With a slot machine, the thrill of the action as the gambler inserts the coins, pulls the handle, or presses the buttons, is almost continuous—as long as the money lasts. The American people have become so enamored of slots that they now account for about 65 percent of casino gambling.

It should be noted, in passing, that there is no skill involved in casino games (with the single exception of blackjack). What gamblers get is speed and intensity of action, plus the chance of hitting a winning streak that can lead to a big win, the win that will salve all their previous losses. At roulette, the queen of casino games, hitting the right number pays 35 to 1. Never mind that the edge against the player on the double-zero game is an iniquitous 5.26 percent, compared with only 2.7 percent on the single-zero European game. If luck, i.e. short-term fluctuation, runs your way, you can break the bank or at least win a small fortune. (What is the sure-fire way to make a small fortune in a casino? Answer: start off with a large fortune.)

**T**he gambling games offered by casinos act like a drug. It's part physical, part psychological, highs and lows, over and over, in rapid succession. These fluctuations of loss and gain, the glint of light and action, awareness of other people gambling, the sense underneath it all of playing with risk, of living on the edge of danger, are exciting. This is what the expression "getting the adrenalin going" means. The physical sensation—dryness in the throat, sweaty palms, butterflies in the stomach, the feeling of every nerve on full alert—is, for many people, highly pleasurable.



The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds (circa 1620), by Georges de la Tour.

Some psychologists have suggested a parallel between gambling and sexual excitement: build-up, climax, release of tension, repeated over and over. There is no need to press the analogy too far to make the point that gambling carries a strong emotional charge.

To increase the sense of indulgence, of fantasy, of losing hold of reality, casinos create an ambience far removed from the surround of ordinary life. No clocks. No daylight. Seductive lighting. Flashes of surreal color. The whirl of the slots. The beat of music, pulsing under the noise of greetings, shouts, ringing jackpots, whoops from the winners. Drinks on the house—"Keep 'em coming, baby!"—and on every side, the half-open sexual turn-on of cutey-pie dealers in party dress or cowboy gear. What a heady, glamorous mix! How can anyone long resist it? All of it designed to disorient the gamblers and keep them playing. The

whole operation driven—this is most important—by easy credit. "Another 2,000, Mr. Ashuro, just sign this slip, sir."

The social component of gambling, varying from game to game, finds its most extreme expression in baccarat. The baccarat pit is usually separated from the casino floor by a rail; bystanders can admire or envy it, at a distance. The excitement of baccarat comes from the sheer size of the stakes, up to \$250,000 a hand in the case of Australian tycoon Kerry Packer and a few other very rich men. Again, it is a game requiring no skill whatsoever. (Two sides, Bank and Player, each draw two cards with the option of a third card, to see who gets closer to a total of nine.) Baccarat caters to a select group of monied players who probably can afford more or less anything they want in material terms but who relish the challenge of high-stakes play, of taking on the house. The players know that each hand is the

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equivalent of, say, the price of a Cadillac, but the bets are treated simply as so many plastic chips.

What gives this kind of gambling its cachet, its style, is not just the high stakes but another dimension of the game, which might be termed "social pampering." Baccarat provides a handful of top casinos—there is a pecking order among casinos as well—with the cream of their revenue. The managers of these casinos will do anything and everything to attract the high rollers: not merely the routine "comps" (complimentary services) of a free flight and private suite accorded all big gamblers, but the kind of personal attention (such as a favorite chef on call 24 hours a day) designed to gratify a particular customer's every whim. Such high pampering is not readily obtainable in ordinary life, even to the rich. (Girls? Perish the thought! Las Vegas casinos claim they would never risk their gaming licenses for petty prostitution.)

Casino staffs include a particular category of employee called a "host" whose role is to take care of high rollers: the host and the guest each understand that their relationship, cordial as it may be, is based on a false premise—namely the narrow 1.2 percent house edge on baccarat which, cumulatively, is immensely profitable to the casino. But both sides conspire to accept the relationship at face value. (Sometimes the players win a million or two, but so long as they keep coming back, the casino isn't worried.)

**T**he social aspect of gambling comes out most clearly in horse racing. The race track offers a quite different kind of gamble from casino play. For one thing, racing has a public image: people attend race tracks in large numbers, and they read about racing in the papers. The sport can be enjoyed for its own sake. Racing brings together a wide-ranging fraternity of owners, trainers, jockeys, and other followers whose common link is their enthusiasm for the game. In England, this

identity of interest runs from Queen Elizabeth herself all the way down to the cloth-capped punter at the street bookie.

More significantly, from the gambling point of view, horse racing (unlike most casino games) allows room for judgment. The bettor has lots of information to weigh: all the variables of running, timing, handicapping, etc. that comprise form. Horse-race players are notably studious, and the intervals set between races allow time to resolve the more or less insoluble equation of form, to pick a winner. This is a relatively measured form of betting, but being available almost every day, it still carries as much risk of becoming compulsive as any other form of gambling. It is satisfying to make your own judgment (especially if it proves right), but racing is still a gamble—much more so than games such as bridge or backgammon, in which a player's skill, in the shape of his or her own decisions, determines the result.

**T**he element of skill finds its most complete expression in professional gambling. As the odds in gambling are, by definition, against the player, "professional gambling" is something of a misnomer. It connotes players who have managed to turn the odds in their favor. The only casino game in which this occurs is blackjack. Thanks to mathematician Edward Thorp's landmark book *Beat the Dealer* (1962), many thousands of players have learned "counting" (a way of keeping track of the cards in order to increase the stakes when the outcome appears favorable; casinos hate counters and do their best to bar them). "You have to be smart enough to understand the game and dumb enough to think it matters," comments Peter Griffin, author of another treatise on blackjack.

Professional card players certainly exist: poker players, who expect to win more than they lose, and follow no other occupation, work longer hours than many accountants. In the United States, they pay income tax on their earnings. Their edge comes from exploiting

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the weakness of less-skilled players. "Ain't only three things to gamblin'," according to W. C. "Puggy" Pearson, former world poker champion. "Knowin' the 60:40 end of a proposition, money management, and knowin' yourself." There is at the same time a camaraderie among groups of gamblers, whether they are card players or horse-race players (or stock market speculators), which gives their activity an added dimension of a sense of belonging beyond the activity itself.

The truly professional gamblers are the casinos themselves. "If you wanna make money in a casino, own one!" advises Steve Wynn, president of Mirage Resorts, Inc. As the most successful operator in the gaming industry, he has proved his point. The casinos, by gratifying the gambling instincts of the rest of us, are betting on a sure thing. The odds are always in their favor. And if they get the operation right (not as easy it looks, as competition gets tougher), they must win. It took Wall Street some time to grasp this essential truth and accept casino stocks as respectable, but they are now a popular—perhaps even blue-chip—investment.

The rise of privately and publicly sponsored legalized gambling has consequences that are double-edged in different ways for communities and individuals. And the irony is that while the individual pleasures and psychic rewards of gambling have been generally underappreciated, the social and economic benefits of legalized betting are generally overestimated.

**I**t was Atlantic City that launched the gambling spree across the United States, taking it well beyond the arid confines of Nevada. The first casino opened its doors on the Boardwalk in 1978. Atlantic City became a model for other jurisdictions eager to cash in, so they fondly imagined, on easy money. It was an unfortunate model, because,

as anyone who has been there can vouch, Atlantic City is a dismal failure. Instead of being transformed into a new community, the old resort has remained essentially what it was, a glorified dump.

There are exceptions to the Atlantic City model. The most extraordinary, surreal even, eruption of gambling in America has occurred in an unlikely location: the green hills of Connecticut. Foxwoods, on the 2,000-acre reservation of the Mashantucket Pequot tribe, is now the most successful casino in the United States, indeed, in the English-speaking world. It plays host to 45,000 visitors a day. Its annual "drop" (money gambled) is more than \$800 million, its total "win" (money held after paying out the winners, before expenses) around 20 percent of this sum. And all this since 1991. Foxwoods has brought thousands of new jobs to a region in decline. The collapse of the shipbuilding industry in New London as the result of post-Cold War military cutbacks cost 6,000 jobs. Foxwoods has more than made up this total and has plans to add still more hotels and entertainment attractions.

Yet many of the jurisdictions that are so confidently promoting gambling today will discover that the economic benefits are illusory. Even Foxwoods could some day see an end to the easy money as competition in the region rises. What tends to occur is a diversion, rather than a net growth of economic resources. Gambling is, after all, different from other leisure activities. It can so easily destroy people. It can encourage false hopes, undermine thrift, and lead to compulsive behavior. It must be prudently controlled. The risk now is that it may do some of these things to entire communities as well. Even those (such as myself) who appreciate the revivifying effects of a night at the casino or a day at the race track may care to shade their bets in the face of the gambling fever that now grips the United States.



## AMERICA'S GAMBLING FEVER

It is only a little far-fetched to suppose that humans began to gamble almost as soon as they learned to walk. Archaeological evidence suggests that people began rolling astragali (dicelike objects made from the ankle bone of a sheep or dog) some 40,000 years ago.

From the Etruscans to the American Indians, virtually all of the world's peoples have played games of chance. As Lorenz J. Ludovici notes in *The Itch for Play* (Jarrolds, 1962), such games were rarely uncontroversial. Hindu holy books warn against playing with dice; Aristotle regarded dice players as thieves.

Some of the roots of the speculative urge lie in a desire to learn the mind of God. In the Old Testament, God commands Moses to divide the Promised Land by lot. Yet He also rebukes the children of Israel for "preparing a table for Luck." As late as the 17th century, Protestant ministers were agonizing over when it was permissible to cast lots.

Many people gamble just because it's fun. Yet even a game, it appears, is not always just a game. The deeper functions of play are explored in Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (1938, repr. Harper, 1970) and Roger Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games* (1958, repr. Schocken, 1979).

Last but far from least on the list of goads to gambling are greed and compulsion. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Gambler* (1847) features literature's most famous wretched card-and-dice man. From the social sciences come a number of books, including *Compulsive Gambling* (Lexington, 1989), edited by Howard J. Schaffer. Dostoyevsky's own compulsive gambling is the subject of an essay by Sigmund Freud in *The Psychology of Gambling* (Harper, 1975), edited by Jon Halliday and Peter Fuller. Noting that Dostoyevsky was at his best as a writer when most nearly reduced to penury by gambling, Freud speculated that "when his sense of guilt was satisfied by the punishment he had inflicted upon himself, the inhibition upon his work became less severe and he allowed himself to take a few steps along the road to success."

The heavy moral baggage tends to tip the balance in many books. A good account of gam-

bling in ancient times, for example, is *Fools of Fortune* (Anti-Gambling Assoc., 1892), by reformed gambler John Philip Quinn. His well-stuffed narrative—including digressions on matters such as the "nail prick" and "shiner" methods used by card cheats in his own day—is wrapped in a violent antigambling tirade. A more lighthearted survey of the scene in 19th-century Europe is Ralph Nevill's *Light Come, Light Go* (Macmillan, 1909).

In *Gambling and Speculation* (Cambridge, 1990), a less ambitious survey, Reuven Brenner takes a decidedly more relaxed view than Quinn. Other histories include *The Business of Risk* (Univ. Press of Kansas, 1985), by Vicki Abt, James F. Smith, and Eugene Martin Christensen; *Sucker's Progress* (1938, repr. Patterson Smith, 1969), by Herbert Asbury; and *Play the Devil* (Potter, 1960), by Henry Chafetz. The best historical survey of the American scene is John Findlay's *People of Chance* (Oxford, 1986).

In *Card Sharps, Dream Books, and Bucket Shops* (Cornell, 1990), Ann Fabian argues that condemnation of gambling grew in tandem with capitalism in 19th-century America. Gambling, she says, became a "'negative analogue,' [which] made all other efforts to get rich appear normal, natural, and socially salubrious."

William R. Eadington and Judy A. Cornelius, both of the University of Nevada, Reno, have edited a number of volumes surveying recent research, including most recently *Gambling and Commercial Gaming* (Inst. for the Study of Gambling, 1992). On lotteries, see *Selling Hope* (Harvard, 1989), by Charles T. Clotfelter and Philip J. Cook.

One of the most thoughtful books in the field is *House of Cards* (Little, Brown, 1978), by Jerome H. Skolnick. Writing before the recent casino explosion, Skolnick worried that the spread of American-style legalized gambling would spur problem gambling, create an oversupply of casinos, and breed corruption of various kinds. Once left largely to the states, he wrote, the question of legalization might eventually become a major concern of the federal government.