

GAMBLING-MACHINES AND THE AUTOMATION OF DESIRE

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This paper deals with the relationship between gamblers and Electronic Gaming Machines (EGMs), which leads to the automation of desire through procedures. "Pokies", as EGMs are known in the Australian context, are both desiring-machines (Deleuze and Guattari) and cross-platform media where digital gambling and videogame conventions and procedures intersect. I make a case that, as desiring-machines (entities that are defined by their connections), pokies and gamblers form couplings that generate assemblages, which are "passional", "a composition of desire" (Deleuze and Guattari). I also argue that pokies share aesthetic and procedural similarities with videogames and that the gameplay's objective is not always to merely win money, but to fulfil a desire to accomplish missions and embark on adventures. I also argue that these "missions" are related to chasing, the overarching procedure that defines EGM consumption and allows for the automation of gambler-pokie couplings. The aesthetics of most of these procedure-images can be traced back to a postcolonial disposition over foreign lands, peoples and cultures -faux Chinese and Aboriginal lore, exotic deserts, untamed jungles and Arctic landscapes that need to be conquered. This disposition echoes notions such as class-related aspiration (desire) and exotica. I analyse the imagery in some of the pokies that circulate in the New South Wales (Australia) EGM market.

This reading of Electronic Gaming Machines adds a ludic dimension to the analysis of a highly class-bound social practice that is part of a wider socioeconomic trend that points towards a new and contradictory consumption ethic. The application of videogame theory is absent in current discussions on poker machine interfaces and legislation, which generally focus on the figure of the pathological gambler and disregard the complexities of gambling platforms.

Keywords: Electronic Gaming Machines, desiring-machines, assemblages, exotica, videogame theory, chasing

"Of course, I live in constant anxiety, I play for the smallest stakes and wait for something; I make calculations, I stand for days on end by the gaming table and observe the play, I even see them playing in my sleep, but all that notwithstanding I seem to have become numb, as it were, as if I'd become mired in some sort of mud."

- Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Gambler*

"I guess it was a combination of sight, sound and the excitement of winning."

-Mr Stephen Menadue, problem gambler (in Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform, 2011).

INTRODUCTION

The Australian gambling industry automates the desire to bet through one of the most salient forms of digital gaming derived from traditional poker: Electronic Gaming Machines (EGMs). The objective of this process of automation is to guarantee perpetual and increasingly intensified consumption. It is conducted on two levels. On a procedural level, EGMs adopt tropes present in videogames, such as the creation of missions and pyrotechnic audio-visual schemes that add excitement to an otherwise tedious activity (pressing a button, waiting for the reels to align). This excitement reaches such an intensity, that gamblers can enter into what Schüll (2012) calls "The Zone", a state of abandon demarcated from the everyday, yet embedded in the gambler's daily activities.¹ On an aesthetic level, the designs of EGMs echo the imagery of postcolonial representations by displaying lands and peoples that are, from a Western perspective, exotic, and that run parallel to historical trajectories with which some gamblers can identify.

Together, procedures and aesthetics connect gamblers and EGMs and incite the production of what I call the gambling-machine, a derivative of what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as desiring-machines. In turn, gambling-machines form assemblages that constitute markets where material and expressive goods are exchanged (DeLanda, 2006).

Most analysis of the interaction between gamblers and EGMs involve quantitative psychological tests that measure the control that gambling "addicts" (a contested term) have over their impulse/desire to gamble (see Monaghan and Blaszczyński, 2009; King, Ejova and Delfabbro, 2011). These studies are also conducted from the premise that these devices ultimately incite problem gambling: very few studies, however, analyse the nuances of the platforms on which these games are constructed. Nicoll (2010) and Livingstone (2010) identified the need to embark on such an analysis, but, to this date, have not explored the issue further. In order to fully comprehend poker machines as a conduit for human-machine interaction, we need to analyse the ways in which they automate procedures and incite the gambler's desire. This paper offers an alternative ontological approach to EGM-gambler pairings and to gambling markets. It also provides examples by analysing some of the EGMs that circulate in the New South Wales (Australia) gambling market.

Known colloquially as "pokies" in the Australian context, EGMs are referred to in popular and academic literature in a variety of ways that reveal the conflicting nature of their consumption. For instance, in Japan they are called *pachistlot* (a word derived from the combination of *slot* and *pachinko*, a traditional Japanese game), in Spain and Latin America they are accusatorily referred to as *máquinas tragamonedas* or *máquinas tragaperras* (coin-eating machines; peseta-eating machine) and in the United States they have been baptised as "slots", "slot machines", "fruit machines" and, most tellingly, as "one-armed bandits" (a pristine Wild West image). Through these names we can infer the performances of commu-

nicative acts, of a continuous entering and exiting of information and objects. We can deduct the presence of a flow, of human-machine negotiations in which machines are "fed" with coins and non-human bandits "assault" consumers. The consumption of bets is thus being automated.

This automation is closely related to the technological development of gambling machines. Mechanical Gaming Machines, the ancestors of EGMs, were first originated in San Francisco (US) during the Gold Rush Era and in the midst of the expansion of traditional poker from the depths of the Mississippi to the vastness of the West, across the Nevada desert and into the Pacific coastal towns. Their origin is located in an epoch associated with new beginnings and the birth of a nation. Poker machines were introduced into the North American leisure market in 1887 as New Nickel Machines. To define winners and losers, randomness was then achieved mechanically through the spin of reels and the arbitrary pairing of winning combinations. From the United States, EGM markets expanded worldwide and intersected with other gambling traditions.

Gaming Machines were first illegally imported and introduced to New South Wales clubs in the 1930s (Lynch, 1990, p.194),² and existed in parallel with -and added to- gambling cultures that have been present in Australia since colonial times (Two-Up, for instance). Since their subsequent legalisation in 1956 (Walker, 2009), Gaming Machines have been both one of the cornerstones of the Australian leisure industry and, due to possible instances of addiction, mainly among the working class (Breen, Hing and Weeks, 2002), the protagonists of one of the most hotly contested policy issues in regards to production and consumption ethics -particularly since pokies were introduced into everyday community spaces such as clubs and pubs (starting in the 1980s in New South Wales, and continuing in the 1990s in Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania), taking over areas previously designed to host other leisure activities, such as music concerts.

As technological artefacts, current forms of EGMs are positioned at the centre of the mechanical/algorithmic spectrum, as they require the physical and repetitive action of the gambler and preserve some of the cultural and aesthetic conventions of their earliest versions, but perform algorithmic operations to simulate randomness through a Random Number Generator (RNG). EGMs are a connection between the mechanical past and the digital future in the technological trajectory of gambling cultures. As Woolley and Livingstone wittily point out: "These devices are a long way from the mechanical pokies they nostalgically invoke via their often quaint, folksy design. They are carefully constructed hybrids of sophisticated technology within a *présentement* of folksy familiarity- like a 1960s Volkswagen equipped with a Ferrari motor" (2010). This contradiction allows EGM manufacturers and service providers to engage consumers by echoing past sociocultural discursive flows (such as postcolonialism and the pioneering drive of the early mining industry, for instance) and by inciting repetitive bodily actions, while keeping up with the latest technological developments that guarantee an advantageous situation for "the house". This contradiction, however, has rarely been approached from a media studies perspective.

This is a huge area of research opportunities considering that the social role of EGMs has undergone a dramatic change through the recent and increasingly complex digitisation of their procedures. EGMs "have been transformed from simple stand-alone 'machines' to complex communicative and calculative 'devices' that are usually configured as nodes within a network" (Woolley and Livingstone, 2010, p.45). EGMs are communicative devices. They establish communication patterns and flows between the subject and institutional structures (the State, class divisions, the financial system), between humans and artificial intelligence (machines) and among gamblers, as EGMs are generally installed in hubs for so-

cial interaction (pubs, clubs, casinos). EGMs also trigger biological and psychological responses within the gambler's organism and, in cases of extreme consumption, mediate the user's everyday life (Schüll, 2012).

THE GAMBLING-MACHINE: AN ONTOLOGICAL APPROACH TO EGMs

EGM markets can be conceptualised as an assemblage of what Deleuze and Guattari call "desiring-machines" (*machines désirantes*). In *Anti-Oedipus* (the first volume of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*), Deleuze and Guattari lay out a challenging philosophical idea that questions past notions of the relationships between humans and technology, and the ways in which these interlock and form chains of relationships, which they call assemblages or "compositions of desire". I ascribe to Bogard's useful summary of the Deleuzian-Guattarian assemblage:

'What is an assemblage? It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns - different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of co-functioning: it is symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind' (Deleuze and Parnet 1987: 69). Assemblages can be anything from chemical bonds to cultural patterns. Assemblages in their machinic form, above all, are 'compositions of desire' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 399). (2009, p.30)

Sociotechnical assemblages, such as EGM markets, are a collection of organic and non-organic elements, of biological and technical machines. What is philosophically challenging about this approach is that, akin to Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law & Hassard, 1999), assemblages position humans and machines, and their organic and mechanic components, on the same ontological level (DeLanda, 2006). Therefore, assemblage theory calls for an understanding of couplings, of how desiring-machines interlock with other desiring-machines, as well as the social and cultural conditions in which these couplings occur.

It is important to note that Deleuze and Guattari do not ascribe to the general notion of the "machine" as a technological artefact, but consider all subjects (organic and non-organic) to be mechanisms that, in turn, can be formed by smaller "machines", such as the human organs. Humans are desiring-machines just as the artefacts (cars, computers, spoons, pencils) with which we form couplings are desiring-machines. For Deleuze and Guattari, everything, everywhere, is a machine. In this cosmology, Nature is a collection of machines that have the sole purpose of producing for production's sake. The world itself is a "continual whirr of machines" (2004, p.2) that is never appeased.

That said, in Deleuzian-Guattarian thought, a "machine" is "nothing more than its connections" (Colebrook, 2002, p.56). A machine is symbiosis composed by desire. It is this drive to connect that defines the existence of the desiring-machine. Colebrook concludes that for Deleuze: "A machinic becoming makes a connection with what is not itself in order to transform and maximise itself" (2002, p.57). Based on this notion, I argue that it is this desire for transformation and maximisation what drives gamblers to form couplings with EGMs, and that this transformation is sometimes related to social class and the insertion in particular historical trajectories (such as the myth of the Lucky Country or the sense of entitlement of the postcolonial self). As a desiring-machine, the gambler might connect to an

EGM to *become* something/someone different, and it is in this process of repetition (gambling) that they are also constructed as subjects.³ Alternatively, the subject might engage in EGM gambling to enter "The Zone", an existential plane momentarily separate from the predicaments of everyday life, as Schüll discovered in her extensive ethnography of slot users in Las Vegas (2012). Either to *become* something or to forget *what one has become* by remaining in "The Zone", human experience is *transformed* when interlocking with electronic gambling devices.

Deleuze and Guattari also define a machine as a "system of *interruptions* or breaks (*coupures*)", as every machine "is related to a continual material flow (*hylè*) that it cuts into" (p.38). If we extrapolate this notion to the study of gambling, we can theorise that both gamblers and EGMs transgress diverse flows through their coupling. Deleuze and Guattari also state that a machine "functions like a ham-slicing machine, removing portions from the associative flow" (2004, p.39). In gambling assemblages, this *slicing through* is defined by the cultural and procedural *codes* shared by the gambler and the EGM. The EGM *cuts into* the flow of the gambler's everyday experience and alters the position of the gambler in other assemblages (the household, the workplace, the financial system), as witnessed by Schüll (2012) in Las Vegas. EGMs also slice into communities and into the flow of aesthetic discourses, such as kitsch and exotica, which define the identities contained within these communities.

When a gambler and an EGM interlock, something (a sociopolitical discourse, a monetary transaction, an aesthetic and/or bodily experience) is produced. Communication happens. When a gambler activates a pokie, the human organs function as desiring-machines that excrete stress hormones and sweat, and activate the pokie-desiring-machine, inciting it to produce a result. This coupling generates discursive, financial and aesthetic flows, allowing simultaneous and collective couplings to happen (this has been referenced in popular culture, particularly by critics of EGMs).

EGMs fulfil the destiny of the Deleuzian-Guattarian machine: to be the place "where flows enter or leave structures" (Bogost, 2006, p.143). Cultural, social, ideological and economic flows enter and leave the structures (social, cultural and financial) where EGMs work as a *liaison* among other assemblages and humans, as the baby's mouth-machine that attaches itself to the mother's breast-machine in the Deleuzian-Guattarian metaphor. Gamblers and EGMs suck on each other's nipples: they form an intricate mass of "assembled desire".

During a gaming session, the gambler as a desiring-machine also becomes a Body Without Organs, "*le corps disperse*" (Sasso and Villani, 2002, p.244), experiencing a fluidity that intersects with other fluidities. Cook (2009) analysed Internet Gaming Addiction through Deleuze and Guattari's notion of The Body Without Organs, and concluded that this practice allowed gamers to extend their existence beyond the boundaries of their skin. Through an array of other machines (chair, desk, keyboard, joystick, controller) players enter another world (a gaming-space) and establish organism-configurations that they strive to come back to over and over again so they can experience the "limitlessness and intensity associated with becoming" (Cook, 2009, p.196), so they can enter "The Zone" (Schüll, 2012).

In his film *eXistenZ* (1999), David Cronenberg provided a visual metaphor for such a coupling. The main characters immerse themselves in a gaming-space by literally connecting their machine-bodies to controller-bodies that have organic and non-organic components. This coupling provides them with the "limitlessness and intensity associated with

becoming"; through physical dispersion they acquire existential unity.

The metaphor so vividly constructed in *eXistenZ* is also pertinent as an audio-visual representation of the pokie-desiring-machine-gambler-desiring-machine coupling, which I will from here onwards call gambling-machine.

The gambling-machine presumably allows gamblers (albeit, somewhat self-deceitfully) to *become*, to *maximise* themselves through repetition.

CHASING: THE AUTOMATION OF DESIRE THROUGH PROCEDURES

How are gambling-machines generated? The procedures enacted in poker machine playing are seemingly simple, almost mechanical in nature: you insert a coin, you press a button and hope that the right symbols align to your benefit. If you run out of money, you can get more cash in one of the ATMs that are generally installed in gambling venues, automating the provision of funds.⁴ Woolley and Livingstone offer a concise explanation of this transaction: "The contemporary poker machine can be understood as an industrial artefact, a device for staging the sale of a particular good or commodity-the 'bet'" (2010, p.41). They elaborate further, stating that EGMs are "hybrid devices, a composite of computer and video technologies, integrated alongside remnant mechanical components such as the coin-box" (p.45). Furthermore, "the assembly of digitally driven black boxes, pads, and insertion panels that cover the surface of today's gambling device embody the aim to keep players seated for as long as possible" (Schüll, 2005: 68).

The internal processes are digitised (the reels spin algorithmically rather than mechanically), but the experience preserves the aura of past devices while also providing the allure of interactivity offered by videogames. I claim, thus, that pokies are cross-platform media in which digital gambling interfaces and videogame procedures intersect and trigger the player's desire by automating it.

The staging of the sale of bets is, however, increasingly complex, and it involves the work of professionals that range from mathematicians to computer software engineers and computer graphic artists. It also happens, by all accounts, in a *black box* (Latour, 1999), and it is in these hidden mechanisms that the rules of the game are established to automate desire. As Woolley (2007) states, a gambler "in the gaming room of clubs and hotels in Australia participates in a consumption market that is instituted through a systematic deployment of applications of science and technology throughout social space". Meanings in this social space are created around the mysteriousness of the device (Woolley and Livingstone, 2010). The illusion of chance is preserved through secrecy: "How do reels roll inside the pokie?"

Before exploring the procedural similarities between videogames and poker machines, we shall consider one basic question: what is the key procedural particularity of basic videogames? In *Racing the Beam: The Atari Video Computer System* (2009), Montfort and Bogost recall the dawn of arcade gaming, and establish a clear and relevant distinction between early titles such as *Pong* and *Spacewar*, and current videogame systems: "The computer's ability to play against a person and to play somewhat like a person, rather than just serving as the playing field and referee" (p.5). Today, they state, developments have led to the creation of "crafty computer-controlled enemies" (Ibidem). In poker machines, the crafty enemy is the code itself, the Random Number Generator that prevents the gambler from hitting the jackpot (the chances of a top jackpot are approximately one in seven million). Journalist Bill Previtti characterised the computer chip as "the little rascal that controls the random number generator, which controls where and when the screen will project a winning array of symbols" (2006). This "winning array of symbols" can correspond to two vari-

eties of bets: a 3-reel single game or a 5-reel 25-line game (multiple bets, a configuration that incites excitement and repetition, and has been subjected to scrutiny by anti-gambling advocates).

Some gamblers play for hours on end thinking that they have deciphered the code that defines the award patterns and that if they prolong their session they will eventually hit the jackpot.⁵ This is, however, highly improbable. The following is a brief explanation of how a Random Number Generator works. In a modern EGM, a central computer controls the outcome of each "pull" or "push" (in old mechanical devices it was controlled by the motion of the reels). The computer chooses one random number for each reel, maps the number onto a position on the reel, it then stops the reel at the appointed place and scores the outcome. The outcome is *predestined* right in the moment when the player presses the button: the rolling of the reels is just a representation of this automatic process, but it increases the sense of expectation (the vertigo or *ilinx*; Callois, 2001) and preserves the aura of the rituals associated with mechanical slot machines.

Even if the outcome is predetermined and fully controlled by "the house", or maybe because of this, EGMs have been provided with some characteristics, such as gameplay and graphic design, of prevalent screen-based entertainment technologies where unexpected results are the norm. These similarities have to do with the idea of the "challenge", which in pokies are presented, for instance, through the accumulation of jackpots and the "chasing" of loses. They also increase the intensity of desire. In a sense, the punter *chases the computer*, the aforementioned enemy represented by videogame-like villains, until they get the upper hand. Livingstone points out that:

You have to remember that machines are around 100 years old. Aristocrat tells us in its annual report that it spends something like \$120 million a year on research and development, which is a significant amount of money. I presume they are not wasting that money. We can presume that they are doing a lot of work on trialling features which they hope will have success in the marketplace. Remember that success in the marketplace for a gaming machine means getting people who play them to spend more time and more money on those machines. (Proof Committee Hansard, 2 February 2011, p. 34).

In other words, vast quantities are being invested in the development of gameplay that guarantees the formation of gambler-pokie couplings based on continuous play, on the formation of the subject through repetition. This is achieved through "chasing". "Chasing" is "the attempt to recover one's gambling loses by further gambling" (O'Connor and Dickerson, 2003, p.360). This definition, informed by Lesieur's influential work *The Chase* (1984), sketches one of the prevalent cycles of gambling consumption (the other being the perpetual immersion in "The Zone"), of the automation of desire: gamble, lose, gamble some more to "chase" your loses. Although there are many social, psychological and biological factors that contribute to "chasing" (such as the ones explored by Blaszczyński and Nower [2002] in their Pathways Model), both the interface and the gameplay are designed in such a way as to incite the gambler to embark in "chasing" missions within one gaming session, which in turn constitutes one step in the longer, larger mission that envelops an ongoing relationship with the EGMs (this potentially results in problem gambling). The inability of the gambler to refrain from repetition is known in the medical literature as "loss-of-control" (O'Connor and Dickerson, 2003, p.361), but is encouraged by gambling venues through bonuses and loyalty programs.

Chasing is the primordial procedure of the poker machine as a desiring-machine. This concept also echoes one of the canonical notions in the Deleuzian paradigm: that "the subject is produced as an effect of repetition" (Neil 199 8, p.420; cited in Cook, 2009, p.191). As such, continuous engagement with EGMs defines the individual as a gambling-subject.

Chasing is also related to missions and the presence of enemies in videogames. For example, one of Aristocrat's EGMs is based on the movie and television franchise *Mission: Impossible*.⁶ It belongs to the entertainment-style video-slot category offered by the EGM manufacturer. In this pokie the bet is staged by using footage and characters from the on-screen fiction. It combines the universes of gambling and undercover agents. Its promotional materials read: "Espionage meets excitement with six great bonus features" (Aristocrat). The player literally *chases the money* with guns and helicopters, and by participating in showdowns with the series' villains.

The "chasing procedure" also feeds into a misleading notion that through repetition and practice, the player will be able to pass levels and ultimately win the game. In the case of poker machines, "winning" equals acquiring a sudden amount of wealth by defeating an unjust financial and cultural system incarnated by the machine.

There are further ramifications, however. Like in arcade games money could potentially lose its economic value -at least momentarily- in the eyes of the gambler. In "The Zone", currency becomes a token, a gaming device. Gambling-subjects do not play *for* money: they play *with* money. During the human-machine coupling, losses are perceived as the price one has to pay to have a good time. Baudrillard phrases it eloquently, concluding that in gambling money is "no longer a sign or representation once transformed into a stake", and that "a stake is not something one invests", but "something which is presented as a challenge to chance" (1990, p.139; cited in Reith, 1999, p.143). Woolley and Livingstone put it this way: "Money is a medium, not the object in chief of this activity. Certainly, the accumulation of money is not the 'purpose' of EGM play, although the exhaustion of funds terminates the journey. Rather, gamblers pursue an experience of deep meaning apparently unattainable from other sources" (2010, p.57). But what is the "deep meaning" that is attained by playing the *pokies*? It is the pursuit of hope, of the idea of financial bonanza and class mobility though the fulfilment of missions, which could provide the individual with a new identity, a new life, a fresh start.

This said, in EGM playing money equals a stake, the token that is necessary to challenge chance. The procedure of "chasing" perpetuates this notion and reveals the nature of the gambling-machine.

Caillois' categorisation of ludic practices, that has been constantly referenced by videogame theorists (Aarseth, 1997) and gambling researchers (Reith, 1999), is useful for analysing poker machines. Two of Caillois' categories of play are of particular importance in the analysis of EGMs as desiring-machines: *alea* (chance) and *agon* (competition). The balance struck by these two dispositions towards gaming is what defines both gameplay and the discussions around gambling (in particular around problematic consumption). As cross-platform devices, poker machines "produce meaning" (Montfort and Bogost, 2009, p.1) by striking an apparent equilibrium between chance and skill, and, through innovative interfaces, ultimately producing what Manzur (2009) calls "the gambler's illusion", the idea that consistent gambling will eventually lead to a "big win". Thus, *alea* and *agon* are bound together by what Lynch calls "vocabularies of hope" (1990).

In parallel to the procedural integration of EGMs and videogames, there are those who argue that the players' analogous videogame and digital gambling consumption could

shape the ways in which mediated gambling establishes a relationship between players and machines, particularly on the expectations of the gamer/gambler. As King and Delffabro (2011) point out, "it is possible that video game playing may influence some individuals' gambling knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, strategies and/or gambling behaviours". Furthermore, they propose that this develops into false expectations from the player, in particular in relation to the possibilities of winning. As the authors point out: "video game playing leads some people to develop false expectations about the amount of player control within gambling activities, particularly electronic forms of gambling. Because many video games require skill and strategy, some people may develop a belief that, with sufficient practice, they can overcome and master the challenges of the game" (2011). The mingling of digital gambling and videogames extends beyond parallel consumption: videogame-like gambling is not exclusive to poker machines, but has extended into brick and mortar casinos, where, as if taken out of a futuristic techno-ecosystem *à la Blade Runner*, digital croupiers deal hands, or virtual hostesses spin the roulette. This adds to the culture of videogame-like gambling, where the player establishes a relationship with a digital interlocutor and engages with interfaces that provide intricate gameplay.

The gambler can engage in an adversarial relationship with the machine, which in policy discourse has been perceived as a separate entity, with agency and the upper hand in its liaison with the player. This antagonism is further exacerbated by the "opposition between the happiness of *playing* and the unhappiness of *being played* by the machines" (Nicoll, 2008: 117). There is a widespread belief among "digital" punters that as a human invention, the machine can be controlled, mastered, broken in (as Nature was broken in before). This dichotomy is exteriorised in the laying out of arrangements of postcolonial imagery that provide the machine with a personality, that coat it with a layer of ideas and preconceptions.

POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSES AND THE NEW SOUTH WALES EGM MARKET

The symbolic flows invoked by the gambling-machine and perpetuated through repetition are related to historical trajectories related to the shaping and re-shaping of the Australian *ethos* and to postcolonial discourses. As desiring-machines that are part of the chain of "machines-desiring-machines" (Deleuze and Guattari), EGMs are communicative devices on two levels. On the surface, through their aesthetic configurations (colours, sounds, themes, characters, gameplay and so on), they communicate contemporary consumer values (get more for less) and symbolical arrangements that incite the desire to win, to conquer the Other and to master destiny. Their "quaint, folksy design" (Woolley and Livingstone, 2010) allows gamblers to identify their own notions of entitlement, hope and aspiration in the fantastic universes displayed on EGMs. As I have explored in this paper, they do so through procedures akin to those of videogames. On a second level, through the patterns of their consumption, they have the potential to spell out discourses derived from wider socioeconomic arrangements and notions of labour, class, money and luck, all of which also revolve around desire intermingled with hope.

As EGMs are introduced into new assemblages, local, national and transnational markets generate around them. Echoing DeLanda's definition of markets (influenced by Deleuzian-Guattarian thought), I consider EGMs markets to be assemblages "made out of people and the material and expressive goods people exchange" (2006, p.27). The gambler-pokie coupling happens, precisely, in the core of that exchange. These consumption cultures are meaning-creating apparatuses in the sense that notions of economic, social and cultural values are constantly assessed, traded, commented on and created by the exchange of said "material and expressive goods". EGMs are both material and expressive goods. I will now

outline how their materiality and expressiveness comes about in a particular market: the New South Wales EGM assemblage.

As of 2009, there were almost 100,000 EGMs operating in New South Wales alone, out of a total of 197,820 in Australia (Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform, 2011). Aristocrat Leisure Limited, a successful company that sells EGMs to the Australian, North American and Japanese markets, manufactures most of these devices. The company reports a constant exponential growth since the early 2000s (*2011 Half Year Profit Announcement*), and is among one of the most successful Australian companies, as it has a national and international captive markets.

Clubs, a traditional Australian community institution, are organised around gambling (primarily pokies and sports betting), as there are "no restrictions on the percentage of floor space that can be devoted to gambling (as opposed to catering or other recreational activities)" (Walker, 2009: 1). This reveals the emphasis that club owners and policy-makers give to the consumption of bets. These spaces dance to the rhythm of the "continual whirr of machines"! (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004: 2)

EGMs are not exclusive to casinos and massive clubs, or to cities. In urban and rural environments, their presence is as ubiquitous as that of hotels and pubs, as the majority of these establishments offer the possibility of gambling in their VIP lounges.⁷ The VIP Lounge is where chance, competition and vertigo are staged. A foreign visitor might think that something illegal is taking place in the backrooms of pubs, where VIP lounges are secluded from the rest of the space and lit only by glistening digital interfaces. They claim certain exclusivity and their designation (VIP Lounge) has a clear class-related connotation: entering them offers you the possibility of becoming a *Very Important Person*.

In casinos, clubs and VIP lounges avid gamblers embark in a sort of adventure, in what Simmel calls a voluntary "dropping out of the continuity of life" (1971b: 187; cited in Reith, 1999: 126). Lears (2002) recalls extreme cases of such "dropping outs" in the North American context:

In Niagara Falls, casino operators complain that slot machine players are urinating into the plastic coin cups supplied by the casino or onto the floor beside the machines. Some wear adult diapers. All are reluctant to leave a machine they are hoping will soon pay off. And in Louisiana, video poker players report trancelike out-of-body experiences, the feeling of "being sucked into oblivion." (p.1)

Extreme cases like these are the imagined scenarios that delineate the discussion around EGM markets and consumption ethics. The frantic, narcotised state that some players seem to experiment with serves as the measuring stick for regulation. These discussions focus on the notion that EGMs are primarily *material goods*. There are, however, other aspects of EGM consumption that so far have been overlooked and that relate to the *expressive* capacities of poker machines. This paper deals with these *expressive* capacities.

If you walk through some of the biggest *pokie*⁸ rooms in Sydney -such as the ones in The Star casino in Sydney (formerly Star City) or the Penrith Panthers Club, for instance,⁹ or even in small VIP lounges in the pubs that are sprinkled all over the city, you will notice how the aesthetics in many machines resembles that of certain action-based videogames. Punters engage in games in which missions need to be accomplished, adventures await and impossibly buff male characters (*The Phantom*, for instance) fight side by side with anatom-

ically generous female companions (such as the voluptuous protagonist of *Gypsy Moon*¹⁰). Gamblers press buttons time and time again, courting their luck through repetitive, possibly compulsive, actions. They occasionally sip on glasses of warm beer and white wine. Cups full of golden coins lay by their side. At first glance, the images and fictional environments that the visitor encounters are not that different to what they would find in a videogame store or a game arcade. The user is engaged, however, in what psychological studies have termed "continuous forms of gambling" (O'Connor and Dickerson, 2003), in which players establish an ongoing engagement with machines (on short sessions or over many sessions in a prolonged period of time- which can potentially lead to addiction).

Most of the designs displayed on EGMs have an expressive particularity: their design shows exotic landscapes related to cultures or natural environments foreign to what is generally (and perhaps erroneously) considered as "Australian" and/or "Western" (there are exceptions, of course, some of which are described in this paper). *Faux* Chinese (Aristocrat's *Imperial House*, for instance) and Aboriginal lore (*Big Red*), Gold Rush scenarios (*Where's the... GOLD*), exotic deserts, untamed African jungles, *chic* European settings à la James Bond and Arctic landscapes lay side by side in these large halls, where technology and the commercialisation of the illusion of chance intersect. This expressive particularity is related to a postcolonial perspective; consequentially, the nature of the images that embellish poker machines adds a layer of complexity to the analysis of both the procedures enacted through the interfaces and to the analysis of the actual poker machine devices (the physicality of it, the graphic design, the bolts and circuits). When I talk about post-colonialism, I ascribe to the widely accepted definition offered by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin:

'Post-colonial' as we define it does not mean 'post-independence,' or 'after colonialism,' for this would be to falsely ascribe an end to the colonial process. Post-colonialism, rather, begins from the very first moment of colonial contact. It is the discourse of oppositionality which colonialism brings into being. (cited in Martínez-San Miguel, 2009: 188)

I am concerned with this "discourse of oppositionality" which sprouts from past and current historical trajectories, in Australia and elsewhere (the US market analysed by Schüll, for instance). EGM aesthetics rely heavily on postcolonial exotica, the discursive practice of making other cultures seem strange and uncanny, a curiosity, and sometimes an obscure object of desire.¹¹ As Nicoll identifies, "the iconography of some of the most popular poker machines implicitly references unresolved sovereignty struggles in nations built on white settler-colonisation" (2008, p.115). EGMs intersect with the gambler's own flows of identity and assimilated historical trajectories, and incite the coupling by providing a familiar representation of the unfamiliar. A 2002 study that attempted to detect the main demographic patterns of poker machine players in Sydney, concluded that:

The most important results indicate that the best predictors of per capita poker machine expenditure in Sydney SLGs were high proportions of the resident population who were born in Malta, Greece, Lebanon, China, Italy, Vietnam, Yugoslavia, India or the Philippines; have no vocational or tertiary qualifications; or are unemployed. Also important is that the profile of Sydney populations which spend highly on poker machines broadly supports the lower socio-economic profile identified in previous Australian studies. (Breen, Hing and Weeks: 310)

Apart from flows that sculpt the identity of gamblers in terms of class and ethnicity, other historical factors contribute to this automation of desire. EGMs are also deeply embedded in the Australian ethos. For Walker, "gambling, drinking and sport" are "three of the most important forms of recreation in Australian history" (2009, p.3). At once deemed as a social laceration and glorified as a source of national identity and community building, Australia's relationship with gambling can be traced back -like its American counterpart (see Mazur, 2010 and Lears, 2003)- to the pioneering spirit of the first European settlers, who tamed a foreign and often violent territory that later became the "Lucky Country" (Nicoll, 2010). On a symbolical level, Australian poker machines perpetuate the conquest of a territory and its peoples -they preserve various processes of colonisation and discourses of hope. They also prolong the taming of Fortuna: the imposition of human will over the uneasiness inspired by the unknown. This is one of the discursive flows that are invoked by gambling-machines as narrative devices. In the 2011 report written by the Parliamentary Joint Select Committee on Gambling Reform (led by Andrew Wilkie MP), Dr. Charles Livingstone briefly acknowledged the "symbolism on the machines", when stating:

We know a machine with particular symbolism in the artwork will be very attractive whereas the same machine with different artwork will be less successful in the market. It is likely that some of the symbolism actually works to provide a greater incentive for people to play the machines. (Dr. Charles Livingstone, Proof Committee Hansard, 2 February 2011: 34.; cited in The design and implementation of a mandatory pre-commitment system for electronic gaming machines: 41)

In a vast majority of poker machines, what Livingstone refers broadly as "symbolism", are echoes of postcolonial tropes. These postcolonial representations are connected to the sense of a "mission" to conquer foreign, exotic environments through the pursuit of "winning" and economic gain. These representations also bring to mind the simplistic "good conquers evil" and "civilisation conquers the barbarians" plots of Hollywood mainstream cinema. This iconography is made culturally familiar through its association with the narratives of well-known action movies and videogames, such as the *Indiana Jones* and *Tomb Raider* franchises, or cultural icons such as John Wayne.

By postcolonial aesthetics I mean that audio-visual constructions in EGMs typically reference a sense of differentiation from the historical Other, or what Said has alternatively (and not without controversy) called "Orientalism". Postcolonial aesthetics exteriorise the conflicts driven by historical colonisation and newfound relationships between peoples, and between humankind and the furtive, untamed natural world (a universe that Luck is also part of). In Australia, flows of postcolonial discourses and identities influence race, class and cultural relations. For immigrants and ethnic communities, postcolonial imagery could also be a reminder or a shady representation of their historical and cultural past.

Products such as *More Chilli*, *Jackpot Catcher* (Native-American theme), *5 Dragons* and *Mystic Panda* certainly reflect a particular view of the world defined by class and ethnicity. Riches are paired with the conquest of other cultures and territories through missions. Or they coupled with the idea of a "big win", such as in EGMs with mining or Wild West motives. The postcolonial aesthetics of these interfaces could also be related to recent migratory patterns to and from Australia,¹² and the new cultural notions and discourses of oppositionality that sprout from these.

Gamblers certainly notice the differences. As one Ms Julia Karpathakis, led by exper-

ience and intuition, explained it in her testimonial for a parliamentary report, recalling her ordeals as a problem gambler and the influence that the imagery had on her choices:

There is a lot of trickery. That is what it looks like now. But back then it had a romantic feel about it. The imagery is very romantic; I would play Sweethearts, Cleopatra, Jewel of the Nile and all of those kinds of machines. I hated Shogun-I was never attracted to the look of that one. So it was a bit romantic, not in a romantic-romantic way but dreamy, if you know what I mean. (Ms Julia Karpathakis, Committee Hansard, 1 February 2011, p.15; cited in The design and implementation of a mandatory pre-commitment system for electronic gaming machines, p.10)

Ms Karpathakis' testimonial is telling for a number of reasons. First, it serves as evidence that for certain gamblers the symbolic arrangements of interfaces, the "trickery", as Ms Karpathakis calls it, is one of the factors that draw them to play or choose one EGM over another. She also describes the experience as "dreamy", which takes us back to the state that Reith described as "oneiric" and which is one of the defining particularities of the gambling-machine.

Alongside these images, poker machines emit sounds akin to those of videogames: explosions, high-octane rock and roll music, and sound effects that would be at home in a Hollywood blockbuster. If someone hits the jackpot, celebratory notes travel through the room, and punters turn their heads momentarily to catch a glimpse of the lucky one who got to experience the much sought-after "big win", the highlight of this form of consumption.

I will now provide four telling examples. Firstly, *Firelight*, one of Aristocrat's (www.aristocrats.com.au) EGM products, used in many *pokie* rooms across New South Wales and the rest of Australia, is advertised as follows:

Travel to an ancient civilization where magic and the powers of nature rule the world. The mystical Phoenix will cause your luck to rise as the volcano erupts with multiplied wins!¹³

In *Firelight*, the mission is not merely to make money, but to make the volcano explode with "multiplied wins". It is also about visiting an "ancient civilization" and extracting something (resources) out of it. The advertisement could also have a gender base connotation: winning is the equivalent of a pyrotechnic ejaculation. The sexualisation of gambling -that is, meaning-making through appealing to the realm of the erotic- is a common practice among interface designers. Advertisements for online casinos, for instance, often show attractive women inviting potential clients. This has been referred to elsewhere; Nicoll, for example, relates the following: "I also have a T-shirt purchased in Brisbane which displays a cartoon symbol in profile of two men each with the handle of a vibrating one-armed bandit or poker machine in his arse while coins pour out of his cock. Above the image are the words 'WARNING POKIES!'. Two points that struck me about the image are: its very literal re-contextualisation of the 'money shot' with which traditional pornographic representations climax, and that its representation of poker machines erotically vibrating players is very close to the truth. I'm not sure when this image was produced but in the past five years pokies living subtle vibrations timed to 'go off ' with the animated and musical 'features' have been installed in most Australian gambling venues." (2008, pp.104-105)

In *Love of the Nile* (Figure 4), Aristocrat pairs two of the main characters of its brand

mythology, a practice that shares similarities with film, comic or videogame cross-overs:

The love story between two of Aristocrat's most instantly recognizable game characters from the iconic games- Queen of the Nile and King of the Nile. The symbols in this 25 Line game are based on the original titles to provide the classic look and feel combined with an innovative feature extension. During the Feature when 2, 5 or 7 scatters are collected the BONUS WILD symbol is added to the reel, the BONUS WILD symbol combines the CLEOPATRA & PARAOH WILD characters onto one symbols bringing these two characters together at last.

Stuntman Sam, another of Aristocrat's poker machines (Bonus Bank category) is not related to a postcolonial discourse, but exemplifies the *videogamification* of Electronic Gaming Machines. The interface presents an animated character that *performs* the outcomes of the player's forays with luck. Stuntman Sam, a circus artist, enacts chance in a flamboyant, pyrotechnic manner. The game is advertised in the company's website as follows:

In this daring new game, players meet Stuntman Sam, the latest hero from Aristocrat. Stuntman Sam attempts several heart-stopping, death-defying feats to give the player an entertaining gaming experience and a big win [...] This action packed game will have players cheering Stuntman Sam on as he attempts death defying stunts including getting shot out of a cannon, high dive, dodging the knife throw, bike jump an a risky plane stunt.¹⁴

Another one of Aristocrat's games, *Hillbillions* takes "players on an exhilarating journey celebrating the culture of mountain people with Billy, the Hillbilly". This constitutes another form of exoticism, one that alludes, perhaps in a condescending manner, to a rural segment of the population.

After performing this brief textual analysis of the sort of images that adorn these and other poker machines, and the spaces in which they are located, we can put forward the argument that this combination strives to produce what Reith calls "sensory maelstrom" (1999: 128). That is to say that the perception of time and space changes, and the player can enter a state that has been described elsewhere as "oneiric".

The fantastic worlds represented in poker machines aid in producing this oneiric state, a specific form of consciousness that gambling practices already induce. It would be counterintuitive to think, therefore, that the phenomenology of a gambler's experience remains the same regardless of the way in which the game is presented (if the *pokies* are not exciting enough, Stuntman Sam comes to the rescue!).

CONCLUSIONS

The interactive images that engage players turn poker machines into storytelling devices. Procedure-images add a layer of narrative complexity to the analysis of the discourse rooted in poker machines. How procedures are enacted is as important as the procedure itself. The worlds represented on the poker machines (on the graphic design of the hardware) and on the screen interfaces influence the nature of the adventure that the gambler/player embarks in.

Playing a boring, dull version of video poker does not incite the same procedures, or

connect with the same cultural and historical flows, as an adorned interface. The purpose of this paper has been to discern the nature of those procedures and discourses in the controversial poker machine market in Australia, for as Nicoll identifies: "The shape of modern gambling not only reflects the nature of social relations in any society, but also powerfully determines new social and political outcomes" (2008, p.103). These social and political outcomes are the factors that have fed the fire of political discourse over poker machine policy, and define the opposing ends of the spectrum in policy discussion: State intervention versus industry self-regulation.

This paper does not intend to dehumanise the gambler or disregard the psychological dimension of pokie consumption or its social repercussions. Rather, I abstract the EGM-gambler coupling to initiate an academic discussion of the peculiarities gambling-machine and its media specificity.

ENDNOTES

- 1: In *The Gambler*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky narrates the wanderings of Alexei Ivanovich, a persistent, compulsive gambler. This short novel is widely referenced in gambling studies (Reith, 1999; Schüll, 2012) as an accurate, thoughtful representation of repetitive gambling, such as the one provided by EGMs, and provides a useful example of what Schüll describes as "The Zone".
- 2: Caldwell (1972) argues, however, that their introduction could date back as far as the 1890s.
- 3: Medical literature has constructed the figures of the "problem gambler" and the "pathological gambler" based on the intensity of the gambler's desire and its subsequent fulfilment.
- 4: This arrangement has sparked some controversy; in 2011 the Australian activist group Just Act launched the "ATMs Away From Pokies campaign". See <http://www.justact.org.au/action-20-atms-away-from-pokies/> (accessed April 4, 2012).
- 5: Others, however, simply want to remain in "The Zone", as one of Schüll's respondents explained: "Today when I win -and I do win, from time to time- I just put it back in the machines. The thing people never understand is that *I'm not playing to win*" (2012, p.2).
- 6: To see a promotional video, visit <http://www.aristocrat.com.au/products/games/Pages/gamedetail.aspx?GameTitle=Mission:%20Impossible> (accessed on March 21, 2012).
- 7: There are also numerous online casinos that offer online *pokies*, such as www.noblecasino.com, www.slotmachinesonline.com, and www.playonlinepokies.com, among many others. There is also a plethora of smartphone and tablet apps such as *Slots Journey*, *Casino Master Slots*, *Slots-Pharaoh's Way*, *Slots by Zynga* and *Slots of Gold*.
- 8: It is worth acknowledging that there are also numerous poker machines (or slot machines, as they are commonly known in the web) in online casinos. They replicate the procedures and feel-and-look of physical *pokies*.
- 9: I conducted informal ethnographic observation in these sites.
- 10: To watch a video of the images displayed in this EGM, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgGd2udr76c> (accessed April 5, 2012).
- 11: The *Tin Tin* comic book series, created by the Belgian artist Hergé, is an example of exotica: a European-centred view of other continents and peoples, it has recently been deemed as a somewhat crude, uninformed view of the cultures that Europeans encountered during and after the processes of colonisation.
- 12: For instance, in the suburb of Cabramatta, NSW, the Vietnamese community is deeply invested in poker machine gambling. The Stardust Hotel is one of the highest-gross-

ing venues in New South Wales (Vanda, 2010). Analysing the Fairfield EGM market, of which Cabramatta is part, Saulwick and Moore (2011) recall that: "The council estimates the area's unemployment rate is more than 10 per cent, double the state average. Fairfield residents are twice as likely to receive the disability support pension as others in NSW. On the Bureau of Statistics' measure, it is Sydney's most disadvantaged region. And yet Fairfield is at the heart of Sydney's poker machine industry and the licensed clubs that dominate it."

- 13: From "Fireflight" at: <http://www.aristocrat.com.au/products/games/Pages/Firelight.aspx> (accessed January 24, 2012).
- 14: To watch a promotional video visit: <http://www.aristocrat.com.au/products/games/Pages/gamedetail.aspx?GameTitle=Stuntman%20Sam> (accessed January 24, 2012).

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