

# CRITICAL gambling studies



ISSN: 2563-190X. Available Open Access at <https://criticalgamblingstudies.com>

## “Almost the Same but not Quite”: The Camouflage of Play in Gambling Iconography

Fiona Nicoll, César Albarrán-Torres

APA Citation: Nicoll, F., & Albarrán-Torres, C. (2022). “Almost the same but not quite”: The camouflage of play in gambling iconography. *Critical Gambling Studies*, 3(2), 160-173. <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs78>

### Article History:

Received August 2020

Accepted March 2021

Published July 2022



© 2022 The author(s)

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/). Authors retain copyright of their work, with first publication rights granted to *Critical Gambling Studies*.





## **'Almost the Same but not Quite': The Camouflage of Play in Digital Gambling Iconography**

Fiona Nicoll, <sup>a</sup> César Albarrán-Torres <sup>b1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Alberta

<sup>b</sup> Swinburne University of Technology

**Abstract:** Digitally mediated social networking is now an ordinary aspect of everyday life and gambling platforms are designed accordingly. This article explores how changing iconography has facilitated gambling's rapid integration within social media and interactive entertainment products and platforms. While there is a substantial literature in cultural studies of digital video games and virtual worlds, most of the academic literature on gambling addresses clinical and regulatory challenges associated with problem gambling. As a consequence, the role of visual iconography, gameplay, narrative and soundscapes in constructing cultural spaces and products of gambling has been largely neglected. Critically engaging with established and emerging theories of mimesis and play, we explore how visual design facilitates the growth of new markets for gambling in a digital culture that privileges interactive forms of consumption.

**Keywords:** gambling, iconography, digital media, camouflage, social identities, mimesis

Article History: Received August 2020; Accepted March 2021; Published July 2022

Available Open Access from <https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs78>

### **Introduction**

Our aim in this article is to develop a theoretical framework to account for how social relations of power operate within and through the iconography (visual design and its systems of symbolization) deployed in digital platforms of gambling. Our study of the systems of images and symbols mobilized in different kinds of gambling platforms will show how and to what effect cultural meanings of play are rearticulated through digital gambling products that are increasingly integrated with social media and video games. We will also explore how these meanings seep into other spheres where money and risk converge, such as global capital and casual stock trading. We argue that, rather than being either distinct from or convergent with other forms of commercialized entertainment, gambling spaces and products are increasingly shaped through processes of camouflage. Our conclusion explores implications of this research for existing theories of gambling and play.

### **Theorising Gambling Iconography**

Gerda Reith argues that, until quite recently, gambling games have been "characterized essentially by their separateness, both temporally and spatially,

from everyday life" (2006, p. 257). Gambling's graphic design emerged from specific values, meanings and spatial regimes generated over three centuries of more or less strictly regulated games for money in Western Europe and its settler colonies (Huizinga, 1955; Caillois, 2001; Goffman, 2006; Kingma, 2011). While regulated commercial gambling is now recognized and tolerated in many jurisdictions as a legitimate business and a valued contributor to state revenues, it is not without criticism and reliably produces news of corruption, compulsive consumption, or fraud. Embedding gambling within ubiquitous platforms of digital, online and mobile play has become a profitable strategy for gambling providers and has advanced the cultural normalization of risk-taking activities (Young, 2010, p. 258). As gambling products change through their entanglement with other kinds of media platforms and texts, they come to resemble environments with which consumers are already familiar. Customized iconography enables developers of products – including videogames and financial apps – that are not currently classified or regulated as gambling to incorporate features that invite gambling behaviours.

Before proceeding further, we need to address a paradox that has vexed gambling and play researchers

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding author. Email: caalbarrantorres@swin.edu.au



over the generations. How is it possible for gambling to be experienced both as inextricable from everyday life and a fun site of escape from its demands? A useful starting point is to revisit Roger Caillois' (2001) account of play as a sphere of free, separate and unproductive social interaction governed by rules and make-belief. Caillois provides four typologies of play, much referenced in game studies: agonistic, aleatory, mimicry and vertigo. Agonistic play describes active competitions of strength, intellect and skill between players; aleatory play foregrounds chance over the agency of the player; games of simulation or mimicry involve a loss of self through identification with another human or non-human entity, such as an avatar in digital environments; games of vertigo orilinx produce physical disorientation or heightened states of consciousness such as trance or spirit possession. This expansive account of play is not only useful in contexts where the border between platforms and practices of gaming and gambling have become blurred; it also provides a way to understand power relations involved in this development (see Young, 2010, p. 260). Below we will see how synergies between transnational gambling, entertainment and social media industries have enabled products to be camouflaged as sites of play, fun and "safe risk".

While "convergence culture" (Jenkins, 2006) is one way to understand the blurring of distinctions between media delivering gambling, entertainment and play, we will argue that camouflage is a strategy used by commercial interests within an agonistic competition for players/consumers. For various legal, political and cultural reasons the convergence of gaming and gambling is incomplete and, arguably, impossible. In research on social gaming developers and online gambling executives, anthropologist Rebecca Cassidy found that apps developed for social gamers were more likely to offer expansionary spaces of self-development and collaboration, with world-making and fun rather than taking winning and financial gain as the primary focus (Cassidy, 2013). Thus, she concluded: "The encounter between social gaming and gambling is framed by social and organizational differences ...and profoundly different understandings of player motivation" (Cassidy, 2013, p. 82). Rather than flattening important epistemological and moral distinctions between gambling and gaming by overemphasizing processes of convergence, the concept of camouflage allows exploration of the ambivalence between gambling as a term associated with adult entertainment, greed and vice – on one hand – and play as a term with connotations of creativity, childhood and wonder – on the other.

As new opportunities for gambling, finance, and play become continuously available through apps on our mobile devices, heightened uncertainty arises about where playful recreation ends and extractive commerce begins. Gambling, understood as a transaction that involves the purchasing of risk, is

camouflaged as benign, everyday entertainment. Our definition of camouflage as applied to gambling will draw on several theoretical sources. Gregory Bateson's account of mimesis and meta-communication (1972/2006) uses the example of animals "play-fighting", both as training for actual combat and as combat in itself. In human contexts where cultural meanings and social practices are elaborated through language, play is a meta-communicative activity that is equally unstable (Bateson, 1972/2006, p. 319). We also draw on Jacques Lacan's reflections on mimesis to understand how commercial gambling operators operate within and actively shape shifting cultural boundaries between gambling and play: "It is not a question of harmonizing with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled – exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare" (cited in Bhabha, 1984, p. 125). And we are influenced by Homi Bhabha's investigation of the intersubjective ambivalence generated by encounters with that which is "almost the same but not quite" (1984, p. 130). At the level of player/consumer experience, this ambivalence prompts unsettling and vertiginous questions such as: Is this just a game? Am I playing for real? Is this still fun? Who is really in control? How do I get out? Should I go 'all in'? After briefly mapping some historical shifts in gambling iconography below, we will present two detailed case studies of the camouflage of play.

### **Domesticating Gambling Iconography**

Historically, gambling has occupied a liminal position in Western cultures, distinct both from more "improving" recreational spheres of games and play as well as from the serious spheres of industrial and government activity. Gambling iconography has long had gender and race-based connotations. As Jackson Lears argues in his cultural history of luck in America, agonistic games were initially linked with white men and aleatory games with women and African-American people (2003, p. 99). While the former was associated with a "culture of control" and the latter with a "culture of luck", both kinds of gambling were seen as a potential threat to the "domestic ideal" that developed in the nineteenth century and persisted through the twentieth (Lears, 2003, p. 86). He describes the domestic ideal as "... an intimate providential order, where risk and uncertainty were kept at bay by love... [The home] was on the front line of the cultural war against chance – an agency of progress, a means for preparing productive rational citizens" (Lears, 2003, p. 172). After the prohibition era, a division of space emerged to exclude practices of gambling from domesticated spaces of everyday production and consumption. Regulated gambling was contained in flourishing casino resorts of cities like Las Vegas, Reno and Atlantic City, far from the mostly white American suburbs where the culture of control governed the family and related social institutions. A distinctive cultural iconography for

gambling was elaborated through urban planning, architecture, analogue gambling devices and interior design. These traditions of gambling and urbanism have been exported to Macao and other parts of the world via the establishment of venues owned by transnational operators such as Wynn and MGM.

An important characteristic of the iconography of gambling spaces during the second half of the twentieth century was its ambivalent relationship to other cultural and historical spaces within the Western imagination. For example, the luxury of the casino resort was almost the same but not quite as the mis-enscene of spaces of games for money associated with European aristocracy; themed resorts in Las Vegas were modelled on the attractions of Disneyland, archaeological sites such as the Egyptian pyramids, European cities like Paris and reproduced the experience and amenities of mega shopping malls. Pervasive cultural codes of luxury, excitement and entertainment not only demarcated gambling spaces as physically separate from everyday life; they arguably encouraged consumers to remain cognizant of gambling's unique risks. However, since the mid-1990s visual elements of analogue gambling cultures have

become important in making digital spaces feel familiar and welcoming, yet exciting, to consumers using desktop computers.

The confluence of deregulation within many national (e.g., Australia, Canada) and subnational (e.g., Nevada and Missouri in the United States) jurisdictions and the rise of transnational casino resorts, together with the upsurge of digital media platforms and practices, had profound effects on gambling's graphic and aural design. While increasingly sophisticated visualizations of space are appearing in online gambling platforms that resemble virtual worlds and video games, digital gambling has become ubiquitous in casinos and other physical venues. This is not limited to electronic gambling machines; digital visualization processes and platforms are increasingly mediating traditional table games like roulette, sic bo, baccarat and blackjack via large screens in venues. Licensing deals with transnational entertainment industries, mainly Hollywood studios and other U.S.-based cultural industries, have transformed the sights, sounds and feel of many gambling products in venues and on desktop and mobile devices.

**Figure 1.** Slot machine themed after the Ellen DeGeneres Show



Image retrieved from: Nyphinix13: SLOT-a-h'lic's Channel, "–GT - The Ellen Degeneres Show 3 Different Slot Bonuses BIG WIN", YouTube, January 18, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xU03zbG8870> (Accessed August 8, 2016.)



The profitable marriage between gambling, Hollywood and celebrity culture (Figure 1) forged in the mid-twentieth century is evident on almost every terrestrial casino floor today. We might observe a Michael Jackson-themed electronic gaming machine featuring state-of-the-art audio-visual and haptic effects on the casino floor. Or we might investigate a licensed slot machine, based on the hit television series *Game of Thrones* which includes several screens of information packaged as “rules” even though its outcomes are based on a random number generator. This kind of imagery is still referenced in many digital gambling spaces such as online casinos, social casino apps, online sports betting sites and slot machines. Browsing the internet, we can observe celebrities recruited as spokespersons for online gambling operators, such as Samuel L. Jackson, who in the past has promoted the online and mobile sports betting platform Bet365. These ads are often elaborately produced and resemble environments in Hollywood high-concept sci-fi cinema. However, gambling’s infiltration of media spaces and platforms in everyday life has not entirely eroded prior (and morally loaded) distinctions between the cultures of control and cultures of chance identified by Lears (2003). As we will see below, gambling iconography continues to appeal to and reproduce embodied forms of social identity.

### The Iconography of Digital Gamble-Play Media

Gambling effectively migrated to mobile devices in 2007, when the iPhone was launched. This process has seen technocultural shifts such as the development of

iconography based on feminized values of cuteness, romance and domesticity. Consider the effort by gambling providers to appeal to young women and other fans of “cute culture”. Designers endeavour to make gambling look and feel harmless by incorporating elements of popular culture and imagery that infantilizes adult games of chance. In cute slots, imagery that we might ordinarily associate with children, along with the symbolic dichotomy of care/domination that the gambler establishes with animal characters featured on and in these games, is an essential part of the amusement, as is the sociality that may be released by cuteness.

The use of cuteness (or *kawaii*, as it is understood in Japanese-influenced global culture) as rhetoric is evident, for example, in a game called *OMG Kittens!* produced by SG Interactive, which frames gambling with images of cats, collars, milk bottles and yarn (Figure 2). Rather than being merely decorative, these visual elements attach affects to gambling by invoking childhood, domesticity, and a simplistic idea of femininity and human-animal relations. Reels roll and a tabby kitten appears on the screen when the player is lucky enough to hit a jackpot and music begins to play. The advertising for *OMG! Kittens* is similarly focused on cute affects as it asks: “Who couldn’t use a cuddle from time to time - especially from Mr. Whiskers, Tiger, or Bubbles?”. The gamer is then invited to “Come and enjoy the incredible cuteness and potential for big wins in *OMG! Kittens*” (Hollywood Casino, 2016) thereby explicitly invoking the affective potential of cuteness in its offer to the consumer.

Figure 2. OMG! Kittens slot machine



Image retrieved from: SDGuy 1234, "LIVE PLAY on OMG Kittens Slot Machine", YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZSentSHhDpM> (Accessed July 17, 2022.)

Because this interface, which works across various platforms and devices, is themed around kittens, it falls within the tradition of cute domesticated animals in television shows and movies, as well as intertextual cultural forms such as cute cat memes and the extremely popular genre of cat YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok videos. As a dominant aesthetic of digital spaces and a *de facto* cute species (O'Meara, 2014; Wittkower, 2012), domestic felines have inspired numerous memes, videos and remixes that are now commonplace in participatory and fandom cultures. Their incorporation within gambling iconography contributes to a broader process of domesticating commercial gambling industries, which normalizes games of chance. In both of these examples, we can see a repertoire of culturally familiar iconography being used to generate a sense of comfort for players within commercial gambling spaces. This reveals an orchestrated effort to use other media consumption practices, brands and narratives as a camouflaged gateway into gambling. As such it exemplifies processes of camouflage at the heart of platforms that Albarrán-Torres (2018) calls "digital gamble-play" media.

Digital gamble-play is the product of two related but distinct cultural processes. First, gambling practices become more game-like. Second, certain gaming practices, such as social casino apps, adopt the appearance of gambling. In one dimension, the "fun" aspects of gambling are privileged over winning or losing, establishing new dynamics of seduction and control. In another dimension, gambling practices are commonly staged in ways that resemble video games. As gambling becomes increasingly interlinked to other forms of entertainment media, corporations are further able to sell products that equate "fun" to the consumption of what organizational theorist Robert P. Gephart calls financial "safe risk" (2001). A fundamental trait of the "spectacular society" in which gamble-play operates is "the use of simulations to produce safe risk as a consumable service or commodity" (Gephart, 2001, p. 141). Gephart explains:

Financial safe risk emerges in images that depict organizationally produced financial or economic activities, services or products as safe, fun forms of entertainment and investment which can be legitimately pursued with limited concern for or likelihood of extensive problems or negative financial impacts. (2011, p. 146)

Digital gamble-play platforms de-emphasize traditional gambling iconography's focus on monetary exchange (with chips, cash and so on) and the associated affective economy of winning and losing. Instead, they highlight immaterial pleasures and fantasy values of entertainment generated by Hollywood and other global cultural industries. This has seen brands such as Caesars Entertainment become incorporated into the everyday life of social media users

through gaming apps where players can gamble for play currency. Puncturing the *magic circle* (Huizinga, 1955; Moore, 2011; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) that historically separated gambling from everyday routines, these products let real and simulated wagering intermesh with the player's daily activities.

We are not simply seeing a proliferation of digital gambling iconography: Iconography is being used to make gambling products initially appear to us as something else, as a space of online erotica, a space of playful engagement with our favorite movie or television show, or a space of ethnic identification. So how is iconography working to reconfigure gambling spaces and products as familiar aspects of entertainment and social media consumption? And how are existing and emerging forms of identity being reinforced and contested through the camouflage of play in gambling sites and platforms?

One of the most resilient aspects of digital gambling iconography is a dependence on stereotypes anchored in histories of sexual and colonial conquest and cultural appropriation. Consider, for example, the popular product *Día de los Muertos / Day of the Dead*, which exhorts players to "Score big and take your winnings to the grave!". IGT promotes this game as a "heavily-themed graphic package [which] celebrates the popular Mexican religious holiday, 'Dia de Muertos'". This machine features 3D graphics of skeletons, mariachi bands, pan de muerto (a traditional pastry) and altars for the dead, a free interpretation of the hybrid Indigenous-Catholic celebration. While this title could certainly be read as an example of exotica in slot machine design (we can think of other slots such as *More Chilli!*, *Mystic Panda* or *Gypsy Moon*), *Day of the Dead* is directed at the Latino community in the US, particularly Mexican-Americans, as well as Latinx tourists. This cultural identification is further instigated by the availability of a Spanish language version, *Día de los Muertos*, in some US states, including the gambling hub of Nevada, which in pre-COVID times had a large influx of affluent Mexican tourists.

The following section presents two case studies to explain how processes of camouflage work to both unsettle and reinforce regimes of value and social distinction in digital gamble-play. We will see that, as digital gamble-play negotiates tensions between user agency driven by enjoyment (gaming) and industry calculation driven by profit (gambling) it moves towards the exploitation of compulsive play and compulsive communication. This makes digital gamble-play a powerful site of "signifying practices" (Hall, 1997). Below we explore a detailed example of iconographic adaptation that traverses a theme from a source in popular literature, through iterations in Hollywood television and cinema, to a gambling machine and an online slots game oriented towards adult male players.



### Sex/ism and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Digital Gamble-Play

The following example illustrates the entanglement of gambling iconography with a “post-feminist” politics of gender as elaborated by Angela McRobbie:

[P]ost-feminism positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force. (2004, p. 255)

This broader ideological context has re-empowered patriarchal fantasies of erotic possession and domination, which circulate as (apparently) benign signifiers within the digital landscape of entertainment and play of which gambling industries increasingly form part.

*Sex and the City* – adapted from Candice Bushnell’s book, written as a collection of newspaper columns – was a publishing hit from the late 1990s and quickly adapted as a long-running HBO television series

(Bushnell, 1996). The narrative was later extended in two movies in 2008 and 2010, and in 2021 HBO launched a reboot, *And Just Like That*, with three members of the original cast. In 2010, in a licensing agreement between HBO and IGT, a *Sex and the City* slot machine was launched (Figure 3). Although the game is also available to play online (Figure 4), the product designed for venues is distinctive and popular; unusually tall and visually striking, its multiple “frames” appear like windows of the iconic New York skyscrapers in the series on which it is based. Featuring voice-overs from the show’s leading man (Mr. Big, a (pre-presidency) Trump-like financier) and based on characters from the hit production, the game was clearly designed for fans of the franchise. As IGT’s Chief Marketing Officer put it: “We’re thrilled to offer fans and slot players this superior gaming experience. The slot machine is filled with all the fun and fashion we’ve come to expect from *Sex and the City*, and it’s the perfect accessory to any girls’ night out at the casino” (IGT press release, 2010). Note the metaphoric description of a gambling product as a fashion “accessory”.

**Figure 3.** IGT’s *Sex and the City* slot machine cabinet



Image retrieved from: FAMNYCMAGEDITOR, “Sex and the City slot game: a huge hit among fans,” F.A.M.E NYC Magazine, September 4, 2014. <http://famenycmagazine.com/2014/09/04/sex-and-the-city-slot-game-a-huge-hit-among-fans/> (Accessed July 4, 2015.)



Figure 4. IGT's *Sex and the City* online slot machine



Notice the visual and thematic similarity with *Sex and the City* which incorporates the narrative of the popular TV show into the gameplay. Promotional image. Image retrieved from: [http://media.igt.com/images/gl\\_12438.jpg](http://media.igt.com/images/gl_12438.jpg) (Accessed July 4, 2015.)

Figure 5. Live Casino Direct's *Gems and the City* online slot machine



Image retrieved from: <http://www.livecasinodirect.com/games/online/gems-city/> (Accessed 27 October 2014.)



This framing of gambling as an “accessory” provides a thematic link to an online gambling product titled *Gems and the City* promoted by gambling portal livecasinodirect (Figure 5). While the television series, film and gambling machine are licensed adaptations, the substitution of “gems” for “sex” designates a distinct product. Intertextual connections with the game and the earlier book, television series, film and slot machine are evident in the promotional blurb:

Two model brunettes and two beautiful blondes line the reels of *Gems and the City* slot machine. Dazzling in diamonds, the girls as well as the poker run symbols are studded with diamonds and the images are all colorful, sparkly, and soft with curves and sensual slot style. (Live Casino Direct, n.d.)

As with the licensed gambling product, the iconography is clearly coded as feminine, romantic and playful. References to diamonds evoke questions to do with “marriage and the modern woman” that drive the narrative of *Sex and the City*.

A third game, *Girls and the City*, developed by Slotomedia, is promoted through Facebook via Suggested Posts that, through an algorithmic selection process, exposes individuals to content based on their past activities, social interactions and profile in the social networking site (Figure 6). While this game is anchored in *Sex and the City*'s intertextual universe, it clearly appeals to other kinds of desires and players. Advertised as “Fun Australia Games for Men”, *Girls and the City* employs quite different cultural codes from those in the texts described above, containing images of women that resemble erotic dancers in adult clubs, sites of sexual-economic exchange with their own codes and set relationships of power (Frank, 2007).

**Figure 6.** Promotional material for the *Girls and the City* online slots.



Contrary to *Sex and the City*, this product is designed for male players. Image retrieved from: <http://slotomedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/screen-02-1.jpg> (Accessed July 4, 2015.)

While the games discussed previously refer to relatively benign pleasures of female bonding, heterosexual marriage and conspicuous consumption in the Big Apple, *Girls and the City* brings together two offline cultural spaces, the casino and the strip club, that are often associated with crime, abuse, vice and problematic forms of consumption. Strip clubs are commonly depicted in other digital entertainment platforms, most noticeably mainstream video games such as *Grand Theft Auto IV* (Rockstar Gamers, 2008), *Mass Effect 2* (BioWare, 2010), *Hitman Absolution* (Square Enix, 2012) and *Metro Last Light* (Deep Silver, 2013). Whereas in *Girls and the City* user agency consists in gambling (triggering the virtual reels) for play money, in

these video games, players can demand lap dances, beat up or even kill the women. In both instances, however, fun is associated with some sort of violent male control over women’s bodies.

*Girls and the City*'s gameplay is described in quite different terms compared to the gambling platforms discussed previously. The *Sex and the City* slot machine and the *Gems and the City* online games are described in promotional material with reference to gendered aesthetic and entertainment values. In contrast, *Girls and the City* is described in ways that emphasize details of play, winning and voyeuristic pleasure. References to addiction and sexual conquest trigger connotations of

agonistic and aleatory gambling practices, as well as video gaming:

While the sensuality is there, it is very much understated and is not in your face. As such, it enhances the feel of the slot machine and allows the user to focus on playing the game, rather than being distracted by titillation... It is sexy, sensual and luxurious yes, but it also is most importantly, a very enjoyable and addictive 5-reel pokie with plenty of Wilds and Scatter features to keep beginner and more experienced players playing and focused on what they need to be in order to maximize their chances of winning... If you like looking at half-naked girls while playing slot machine then that's a bonus too. (Slotomedia, 2015)

All of these examples are symptomatic of a digital media context in which gambling can be camouflaged as play and playful entertainment can be camouflaged as gambling. While gambling with real money appears as glamour and consumption in *Sex and the City* and *Gems and the City*, in *Girls and the City* gaming with play money is rendered 'edgy' through the iconographic evocation of an urban underbelly of vice replete with sex for sale.

The choice of the term 'girls' not only references the familiar terminology of sex industry promotions which offer "Girls! Girls! Girls!"; it also constructs a particular tone of dialogue with the original *Sex and the City* concept. The book and other licensed products explore the romantic dilemmas of the sexually liberated metropolitan woman able to have it all. *Girls and the City* self-consciously appropriates this iconic representation of female agency in the service of patriarchal containment. If *Sex and the City* reconfigured urban space as the single woman's oyster – offering pleasures of romance, friendship and guilt-free consumption – *Girls and the City* seems to restore women to their commodified place as objects – and quite literally prizes – of male flaneural pleasure in urban landscapes of legal vice. Our second case study demonstrates how iconography is used to disguise gambling mechanics of popular finance apps which reliably transform investors into players, and in some cases, addicts.

### **This is what Risk Looks Like: Robinhood and the Piracy of Serious Play**

The digitalization of money facilitates screen-based representations of finance which, in turn, become available to "gamblification". We have argued elsewhere that:

Finance is the prism through which transformations of self are filtered in capitalist societies. By infiltrating domestic spaces and the flows of everyday life through mobile devices, financial markets offer a promise of the sudden improvement of one's life conditions. This is

strikingly similar to the mirage of success presented by gambling. In digital finance and gamble-play, a life-changing event is seemingly within reach. That moment of hesitation or decision can make or break the promise of a better future. Money becomes immaterial, a metaphor for hope and broken dreams. Digital currency alters the dynamics of finance. (Albarran-Torres, 2018, p. 223)

Valued at \$1.2 billion dollars, the much-criticised Robinhood platform enables first time traders to invest for free (with no trader commission) using micro-transactions. Its seductive premise is that financial trading should be democratized, enabling ordinary individuals to participate in global financial markets. In contrast to heavily hedged and diversified corporate trading portfolios for which individuals or members of pension funds pay stock brokers large sums, Robinhood enables users to trade low quantities of shares based on synchronous representations of market data. The app's sleek green interface features colour coded graphics that continually track price movements; players can simply participate in trading by deciding when to press 'buy' and 'sell' buttons, a procedure much like the instinct-driven nature of slots gambling. (Figure 7)

Over the past four years, Robinhood has attracted critical scrutiny, not only from the financial establishment but from agencies and individuals with expertise in problem gambling. Harms to consumers, including several high-profile suicides, have been documented and analyzed in media reports (Graw, 2020; Klebnikov & Gara, 2020). A common thread of these stories is how rookie "investors" became hooked on the pace of trading and other affordances of the trading platform itself. In early 2021, the platform was at the centre of the GameStop share craze, as it stopped its clients from buying shares of the embattled videogame retailer in a move that some saw as protection of the financial establishment. GameStop shares were bought en masse to increase profit for casual stock traders who were encouraged to buy via Reddit boards. Buying GameStop shares soon became a viral action, a sort of digital, financial flash mob dance.

Robinhood clearly addresses itself to the investor-as-gambler by presenting both market data and options of interactivity in a way that resembles online poker platforms, such as *PokerStars*. (Figure 8) And, in an age of "responsible gambling apps" provided by several online wagering companies, it appears to give investors freedom to withdraw funds or halt trading when losses rapidly accumulate. Unlike gambling products, however, the app does not provide specific information about where to seek help if addiction is experienced nor does it provide information about the process by which the app generates wealth for its owners and investors.

It appears that – in contrast to online gambling and establishment stockbroking – the company does not impose a house edge or benefit from a rake.



Robinhood's US website explicitly compares its business model to that of a bank. When users' cash is idle, Robinhood makes loans secured by investment in gold, currencies stocks and bonds in the same manner of establishment financial institutions. It also generates profits by offering margin trading and paid-premium versions of the app.

It is not difficult to see how the rhetoric of democratized finance, the illusion of control provided by the app's interface, and the appearance of banking work together to provide an attractive service to citizens living through unprecedented market volatility following the Global Financial Crisis and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Robinhood has been successfully marketed to millennials who are tech savvy, familiar with micro-financial transactions in their everyday consumption of media, videogames and shopping and suspicious of large corporate financial institutions, as well as often burdened with large student debts. Through this process, it has engaged a

new generation of "traders" who are more familiar with how to play videogames than with the intricacies of financial markets. The camouflage of finance as play can have devastating consequences.

In June last year, a 20-year-old Robinhood user committed suicide after seeing an erroneous display of a \$730,000 negative balance on his account. Perhaps the qualities of mimesis and vertigo that make the platform so sticky induced a behavioral response of self-extinction. Perhaps the appearance of this overwhelming number triggered a feeling that the young trader's economic life was "game over" (See Nicoll, 2013, 2019, 2022). This case and others show that, while playful platforms disembody and dematerialize the markets from which the app generates its numbers, consequences of failing at the game of trade for individuals are ultimately material and embodied.

**Figure 7.** The casual stock trading app Robinhood enters deeper into the user's everyday life via mobile devices.

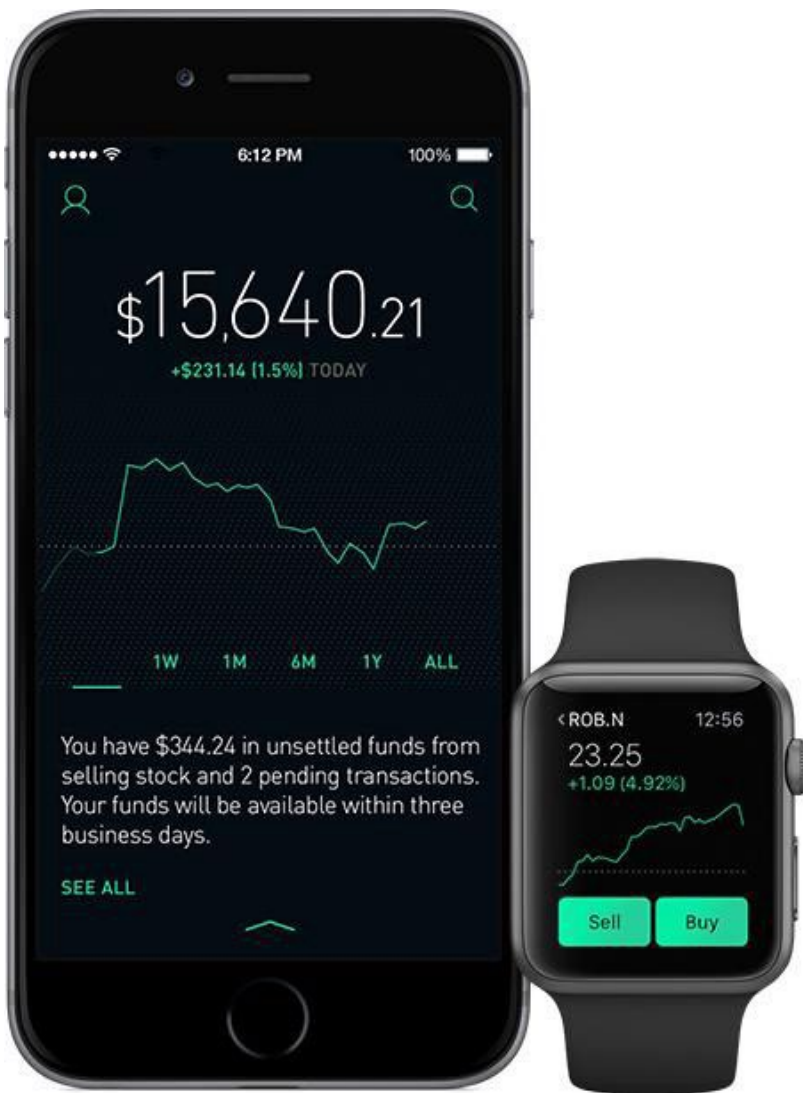


Image retrieved from promotional material: <https://medium.com/canvs/robinhood-5-reasons-the-stock-trading-app-has-cracked-application-design-2e2c727f0735> (Accessed July 13, 2022.)

**Figure 8.** Stock trading apps draw from the design, and look and feel, of poker and other gambling apps.



Image retrieved from promotional material: <https://www.playusa.com/online-poker/apps/> (Accessed July 13, 2022.)

As another example of gamble-play media, Robinhood exemplifies the opacity of digital gambling products which we have described as the “camouflage of play”. The app offers an experience that is almost like professional trading on stock markets but not quite; almost like a videogame but not quite, almost like a slot machine but not quite. It is in this space of ambivalence that potential for enjoyment as well as serious harm arises for its users. Rather than realizing the redistributive promise implied through reference to an eponymous medieval social justice warrior, the platform is difficult to distinguish from the “vicious games” anthropologist Rebecca Cassidy (2020) critically investigates in her study of commercial gambling industries.

### Algorithmic Iconographies

We have explored the incorporation of gambling within digital media of gaming and entertainment across a plethora of online platforms. We have also considered how, in the competition for consumers, transnational entertainment industries are exploiting synergies within and beyond traditional gambling domains. It is much less true today than when Reith’s landmark study of games of chance in Western culture was published that gambling is “strictly demarcated from the everyday world around it” (Reith, 1999, p. 1). Rather than being contained within the space of a casino or gambling venue from which self-exclusion is possible and sometimes encouraged, the zone of digital gambling today is often both intimate and interactive. We have seen that gambling iconography in a digital

age retains aspects of the fetishism, which Homi Bhabha argues drives stereotypical discourse (Bhabha, 1994). However, it is equally driven through the algorithmic device of the proxy, in which binary data about the individual – and the deductions that emerge from that data – take the place of individuals themselves. This section explores the algorithmic processes used to deliver games to individual players, whether at home or via smart cards within venues.

Algorithms are designed to ensure that we are presented with iconography that we like and that we like the iconography that we are presented with (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Carah, 2014, Striphos, 2015). Our digital footprints become proxy for a self, which is affected by and responsive to flows of media content from different commercial providers. In contrast to the rudimentary social interpellations accomplished through commercial broadcast media texts (Hall, 1973), algorithms enable a customised address to potential players. Unlike traditional casino gambling, digital gambling media use iconography to establish continuous engagement with users, offering an experience that can evolve with their preferences.

To play for real or play money online is to participate in interactive process where we touch digital platforms and leave traces of our cultural tastes and consumption patterns so that developers can move us towards further engagement. By partaking in online social networks, users are categorized as consumers for digital marketing purposes, generating “algorithmic identities” (Cheney-Lippold, 2011, p. 168). These “algorithmic identities” enable gambling to be more



easily camouflaged as other kinds of play and fun in our everyday lives. The immersive zone described by gambling researchers (Woolley & Livingstone, 2010; Schüll, 2014), then bleeds out into users' routinized digital media consumption.

Klaus Jensen (2013) reflects on the cultural work of algorithms through the lens of Bateson's (1972/2006) account of meta-communication:

We are defined socially by who we communicate with, in what codes, but certainly also by the content of our communications and their place in wider networks of meaning and community. It is for this reason, not least, that the trails of meta-communication motivate big-data analyses by businesses and security agencies alike. (Jensen, 2013, "Conclusion")

Algorithms mobilise aleatory, agonistic, vertiginous and simulated elements of play as meta-communication to target iconography at actual and/or potential consumers of gambling and financial products.

It is easy for providers to disavow predatory interests in specific populations by pointing to the computing infrastructures that drive their customised marketing. Negative outcomes of consumers' enjoyable engagement with "financial safe risk" (Gephart, 2001) can then be slated to the individual choices of dysfunctional consumers' choices rather than to the very effective marketing of familiar cultural products to specific demographic groups. However, the collection and analysis of aggregated data used in promotions does not absolve gambling organisations from responsibility for individual and social harms caused by their products. There is no reason to believe that the misogyny and racism we have found in gambling iconography is disconnected from the lives of those who design algorithms which are used to classify social media users and deliver content to us.

This section has investigated the role of algorithms in shaping gambling iconography to uncover new markets via the proxies our data generates. Our discussion highlights the limits of critiques focussed on deceptive commercial practices that could be easily ameliorated through tighter regulation of media content and advertising related to gambling. Instead, minimising (if not eliminating) individual and social harms resulting from gambling marketing needs to proceed from an understanding of the techno-cultural processes that structure digital communication at this historical moment.

## Conclusion

This article has linked cultural processes of play to broader relations of power that shape cultural practices and social identities in online and offline spaces of everyday life. We have explored gambling iconography as a form of meta-communication that is rearticulating consumers' relationships to familiar products and

spaces of consumption and entertainment. While licensing deals between gambling corporations and Hollywood film and television industries create more gambling opportunities for fans of specific popular culture texts, gender and ethnic stereotypes fuel the iconography of many digital gambling products. We investigated how iconography reinforces a sense of "safe risk" for "players" in online spaces of democratised finance. And we explored the role of algorithms in producing data about the iconography players/consumers prefer and in uncovering new markets to which iconography can, in turn, be adapted.

In formulating a critical response to some of the examples of digital gambling iconography we have presented, we feel a little like tourists in an unfamiliar city who accidentally wander into a strip club and then complain to management about gender exploitation. The question one immediately anticipates is: "Well, what are you doing here?" Rather than becoming embarrassed by this question and turning away, it is our role as critical researchers of gambling to open a conversation through which we and other scholars might develop some compelling answers.

The role of iconography in endowing even the most voracious gambling products with a genuinely playful dimension demands much closer attention. Bateson argued that, in the absence of meta-communicative processes such as play "... the evolution of communication would be at an end. Life would then be an endless interchange of stylized messages, a game with rigid rules, unrelieved by change or humour" (1972/2006, p. 317). Our research suggests that the reproduction of social agonisms through digital gambling iconography's camouflage as play is often more disturbing and violent than endearing and amusing. Behind the world of cute kittens, sexy girls out on the town and redistributive Robin Hoods, powerful machines of economic extraction are at work. More research is needed to unpack the intimate connections between the camouflage of play in gambling products and platforms and continuing games of war over territories, bodies and environmental resources which are deepening social inequalities, exacerbating global health pandemics and accelerating catastrophic climate change.

## References

- Albarrán-Torres, C. (2018). *Digital gambling: Theorizing gamble-play media*. Routledge.
- Bateson, G. (2006). A theory of play and fantasy. In K. Salen Tekinbaş & E. Zimmerman (Eds.), *The game design reader: A rules of play anthology* (pp. 314-328). MIT Press. (Original work published 1972)
- Bhabha, H. K. (1984). Of mimicry and man: The ambivalence of colonial discourse. *October*, 28, 125-133. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778467>
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
- Bushnell, B. (1996). *Sex and the city*. Time Warner Books.

- Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, play, and games* (M. Barash, Trans.). University of Illinois Press.
- Carah, N. (2014). Curators of databases: Circulating images, managing attention and making value on social media. *Media International Australia*, 150 (1), 137-142. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X1415000125>
- Cassidy, R. (2020). *Vicious games: Capitalism and gambling*. Pluto Press.
- Cassidy, R. (2013). Partial convergence: Social gaming and real-money gambling. In R. Cassidy, A. Pisac, & C. Loussouarn, (Eds.), *Qualitative research in gambling: Exploring the production and consumption of risk* (pp. 74-91). Routledge.
- Cheney-Lippold, J. (2011). A new algorithmic identity: Soft biopolitics and the modulation of control. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28(6), 164-181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411424420>
- Frank, K. (2007). Thinking critically about strip club research. *Sexualities*, 10(4), 501-517. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460707080989>
- Gephart Jr, R. P. (2001). Safe risk in Las Vegas. *M@n@gement*, 4, 141-158. <https://doi.org/10.3917/mana.043.0141>
- Goffman, E. (2006). Where the action is. In J. Cosgrave, (Ed.), *The sociology of risk and gambling reader* (pp. 225-254). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203820070>
- Graw, M. (2020, June 30). Robinhood announces changes to options trading after 20-year-old trader's suicide. *TechRadar*. <https://www.techradar.com/au/news/robinhood-announces-changes-to-options-trading-after-20-year-old-traders-suicide>
- Hall, S. (1973). Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies. CCCS Stencilled Occasional Papers. Available from <http://epapers.bham.ac.uk/2962/>
- Hall, S. (1997). The Work of Representation. In S. Hall, J. Evans, & S. Nixon (Eds.), *Representation: Cultural representations and signifying practices* (pp. 13-74). SAGE.
- Hollywood Casino. (2016). OMG! KITTENS FREE ONLINE SLOTS. Hollywood Casino. <http://www.hollywoodcasino.com/OMG-Kittens>. (Accessed July 3, 2016.)
- Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo ludens: A study of the play-element in culture*. Beacon Press.
- IGT press release (2010, May 26). IGT's Sex and the City (TM) Slot Reaches New Heights in Popularity. [http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=119000&p=irol-newsArticle\\_print&ID=1431677](http://phx.corporate-ir.net/phoenix.zhtml?c=119000&p=irol-newsArticle_print&ID=1431677). (Accessed July 4, 2016.)
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. NYU Press.
- Jensen, K. B. (2013). How to do things with data: Meta-data, meta-media, and meta-communication. *First Monday*, 18 (10) <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v18i10.4870>
- Kingma, S. (2011). Waterfront rise: Urban casino space and boundary construction in the Netherlands. In R. Raento, & D. G. Schwartz (Eds.), *Gambling, space and time: Shifting boundaries and cultures* (pp. 83-107). University of Nevada Press.
- Klebnikov, S. & Gara, A. (2020, July 17). 20-year-old Robinhood customer dies by suicide after seeing a \$730,000 negative balance. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sergeiklebnikov/2020/06/17/20-year-old-robinhood-customer-dies-by-suicide-after-seeing-a-730000-negative-balance/#4fee452d1638>
- Lears, J. (2003). *Something for nothing: Luck in America*. Penguin Books.
- Live Casino Direct (n.d.). "Gems and the City" online slot machine, Live Casino Direct.: <http://www.livecasinodirect.com/games/online/gems-city/>
- McRobbie, A. (2004). Post-feminism and popular culture. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(3), 255-264. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1468077042000309937>
- Moore, C. (2011). The magic circle and the mobility of play. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 17(4), 373-387. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856511414350>
- Nicoll, F. (2013). Finopower: Governing intersections between gambling and finance. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 10 (4), 385-405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2013.839883>
- Nicoll, F. J. (2019). *Gambling in everyday life: Spaces, moments and products of enjoyment*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315772646>
- Nicoll, F. (2022). Gambling is how finopower feels: Ozark and the art of American neoliberalism. In J. Nikkinen, V. Marionneau, M. Egerer (Eds.), *The global gambling industry: Structures, tactics, and networks of impact* (pp. 131-147). Springer Gabler Wiesbaden. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-35635-4>
- O'Meara, R. (2014). Do cats know they rule YouTube? Surveillance and the pleasures of cat videos. *M/C Journal*, 17(2). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.794>
- Reith, G. (1999). *The age of chance: Gambling in Western culture*. Routledge.
- Reith, G. (2006). The experience of play. In Cosgrave, J. (Ed.), *The sociology of risk and gambling reader* (pp. 255-290). Routledge.
- Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. (2004). *Rules of play: Game design fundamentals*. MIT Press.
- Schüll, N. D. (2014). *Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas*. Princeton University Press.
- Slotmedia (2015, July 4). "Girls and the City" online slots. Slotmedia. <http://slotmedia.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/screen-02-1.jpg>. (Accessed July 4, 2015.)
- Striphas, T. (2015). Algorithmic culture. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(4-5), 395-412. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549415577392>
- Young, M. (2010). Gambling, capitalism and the state: Towards a new dialectic of the risk society? *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 10(2), 254-273. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540510364593>
- Wittkower, D.E. (2012). On the origins of the cute as a dominant aesthetic category in digital culture. In T. W. Luke, & J. Husinger (Eds.), *Putting knowledge to work and letting information play* (pp. 167-175). Sense Publishers.
- Woolley, R. & Livingstone, C. (2010). Into the zone: Innovating in the Australian poker machine industry. In Kingma S. (Ed.), *Global gambling: Cultural perspectives on gambling organisations* (pp. 38-63). Routledge.

### Funding and Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare. Between 2019 and 2022 Fiona Nicoll has received funding from the KULE Institute and the China Institute at the University of Alberta, as well as the Alberta Gambling Research Institute (AGRI). AGRI funds supported her to attend the Gambling and Philosophy symposium where this research was first presented. Cesar Albarran-Torres has received no grants in the past three years and this research was not supported.

### Author Details


Fiona Nicoll is Professor and Alberta Gambling Research Institute Chair in Gambling Policy. She is the author of *From Diggers to Drag Queens: Configurations of Australian National Identity* (2001), *Gambling in Everyday Life: Spaces, Moments and Products of Enjoyment* (2019) and co-editor of *Transnational Whiteness Matters* (2008) and *Courting Blackness: Recalibrating Knowledge in the Sandstone University* (2015). She has also contributed



numerous articles and book chapters to scholarship in the following areas: critical race and whiteness studies, queer theory, Indigenous sovereignty, law, feminist studies, reconciliation, cultural economy and critical cultural studies.

César Albarrán-Torres is senior lecturer in Media and Communication at Swinburne University of Technology in Australia. He has been widely published in academic and non-academic titles as a film and literary critic, author and translator. His current research focuses on what he calls “gamble-play media”, hybrid platforms where gambling and digital interactive media intersect. Other research interests include film and television, as well as the negotiations between social media and politics in Mexico. He is the author of *Digital Gambling: Theorizing gamble-play media* (Routledge, 2018) and *Global trafficking networks on film and television: Hollywood’s cartel wars* (Routledge, 2021).

#### ORCID

Fiona Nicoll  [0000-0002-0761-0376](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0761-0376)

Cesar Albarran Torres  [0000-0002-1285-0147](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1285-0147)