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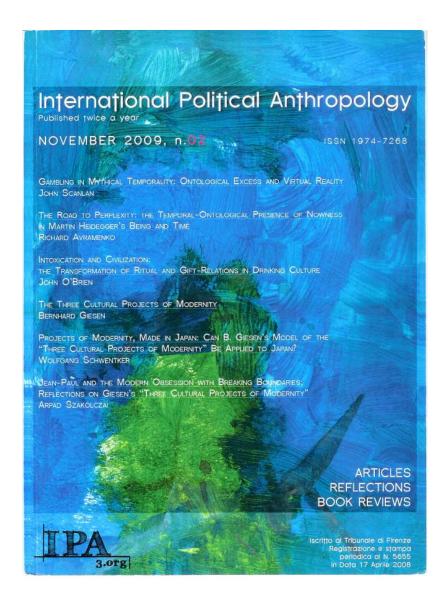
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Gambling in Mythical Temporality: Ontological Excess and Virtual Reality

ABSTRACT

This paper looks at certain features of games of chance to examine in greater detail the ways in which they thrive in a 'mythical' temporality. By examining the origins of modern gambling in the emergence of reason and its creation of an ontological excess that we refer to as 'chance', I argue that in order to understand the real significance of gambling in an age of virtual reality and virtual gaming, we must be able to grasp its existential dimensions and the ecstatic 'disappearance' it permits. I suggest that the ways in which chance has been manifested as the non-human or automatic in gambling draw us closer to the essence of its existential character. Games of chance are explored as encounters with the sacred or divine which, in their connection to a mythic temporality, are seen as precursors of virtual gaming, whose technologies are now driving the growth of gambling.

Keywords:

Gambling, Chance, Temporality, Play

Gambling in Mythical Temporality: Ontological Excess and Virtual Reality

John Scanlan

Man desires to dwell at a center, where there is the possibility of communicating with the gods. His dwelling is a microcosm; and so too is his body (Eliade, 1997: 172)

Virtual reality is older than sin. It is the hallucination of heaven, the peyote vision, the dionysic stupor ... any system devised for losing ourselves in another world (Schwartz, 1998: 362)

INTRODUCTION

Games of chance seem to be not only particularly characteristic of contemporary Western societies, in terms of their increasingly easy availability and the subsequent unsurprising growth of their use, but at the same time symptomatic of the current 'postmodern' reincorporation of modernity's excesses and residues. Little more than a decade ago the availability of games of chance in countries such as the United States of America and Great Britain was heavily regulated and largely restricted to established adult 'playgrounds' (for instance, Las Vegas and Atlantic City in America, and membership-only casinos and uninviting bookmakers in Britain).

The ontological surplus that makes gambling so alluring – the way it can flip one into a seemingly different causal flow – has become domesticated and transformed into one more leisure opportunity; and, for government, another source of revenue. At the same time, as MacKenzie Wark (2007: 28-29) has noted, the prevalence of computer gaming that is built on virtual

reality technology seems to be generating a ludic reality that functions as an escape from the demands and disappointments of everyday life. Clearly gaming differs from gambling in many important respects; but it also shares much in common, and today this is arguably even more the case. In contemporary life the technologies of virtual gaming may offer alternative futures that will never be realised in terms of real consequences, but they also increasingly provide an outlet for the real hard stuff, for games of chance, which do significantly alter realities.

In fact, what I intend to show here is that the route to existential reversal / undoing is now more open than it has ever been through the easy availability of games of chance in contemporary life. Furthermore, the essence of gambling – which is no mere escape from reality, but implicitly always its destruction and remaking – has now found its perfect outlet in the nowhere of the network, and its gamer-inspired virtual gambling worlds which, of course, are now all too real.

Yet to really understand the significance of this development it is necessary to first look at the origins of modern gambling and the ways in which it has been manifested or understood in terms of qualities or states of being that are variously automatic, machinic or non-human. In other words, what I aim to show in this essay is that the reason why the world of virtual reality games can provide the apparatus to realise the perfect disappearance promised by games of chance is that they bring together in a wholly new and unique way machine technologies of repetition with the gambler's impulse to become a kind of plaything of chance.

Indeed, fundamental to this relationship is the fact that in mythical or premodern terms *chance* itself was conceived as a kind of cosmic machine that gave rise to a system of beliefs (or myths) that were – like contemporary virtual reality games – allegorical in nature.

CHANCE AS AUTOMATON

The first thing that we must note is that in modernity chance becomes the mark of the anomalous within a more or less ordered and predictable world which itself derives its hold on knowledge and belief from the way that the human has been able to separate itself from the natural. This is most obviously seen to be the case, for instance, by the way nature is transformed into a resource that – in Martin Heidegger's terms – is 'orderable as a system of information' (Heidegger, 1977: 13); but equally by the way society came to be seen as an entity that could have its flaws and imperfections corrected or normalized by submission to the 'law of large numbers' (Hacking, 1990: 95-104). It is here that we first encounter one of a number of complicated ways in which chance is manifested (and encountered) as something inhuman or machinic.

   To begin to draw out the associations that will clarify these connections we must note that the attempt to characterize chance in this manner is drawn from an older, premodern Aristotelian logic, which nonetheless continued to support the perception of chance as a cosmic phenomenon. Indeed, in the terms of Aristotle's *Physics* what we call chance is translated both by that word and by another term, 'automaton' (Tiffany, 2000: 81-82).[1] This perhaps seems a bit odd to us today because when we think of this word 'automaton' we associate it more readily with the human-made and robotic, rather than the ontological phenomenon of chance (the random, the indeterminate, and so on). But this reversal of meaning (from inhuman to human) has become rooted in Western thinking because, as Derek de Solla Price wrote, from 'the age of Descartes, and perhaps up to and including the age of electronic computers' automata are implicated in the 'triumph of rational, mechanistic explanation' over mythical alternatives (de Solla Price, 1964: 10).

Nevertheless that fact does not remove a fundamental confusion seeing as self-moving machines that resembled human or animal forms – their human creation notwithstanding – left the source of their movement as the precise enigma that identified them as inhuman entities, which might explain why, as Daniel Tiffany has written, such automata have always been thought to have been possessed of divine spirit (Tiffany, 2000: 37).

Consider then a quite different automaton that relates to chance in another way: in terms of a modern calculating function that marks reason's separation from nature or the divine. Charles Babbage's Analytical Engine – conceived in the 1830s and regarded as a forerunner of the modern computer – was a device intended to master the indeterminate and, as such, it gave physical form to a modern conception of chance as a calculable force.[2] The machine itself stood as proof that human reason could be enhanced to produce the means of comprehending what was really a cosmic uncertainty. This modern machine symbolized how obsolete archaic notions of chance were in the modern world. Premodern chance was a different incorporeal machine, a *divine automaton* that attained its hold on the imagination through a variety mythical beliefs or practices.

The crucial thing here is that the pre-modern world, which is held to constitute a world of myth, was, from the inside, a deterministic world. In other words, there is no conception of chance as we understand it from a modern scientific point of view. What this additionally means is that life was governed not by the autonomous legislating self, but by a fatalistic ontology that imputed all causal power to, for instance, the gods. In other words, *modern* reason and subjectivity are very much modern and do not exist in the archaic mythos.

And as Jean-Pierre Vernant (1988) and Hans Blumenberg (1985) – amongst others – have argued, the ancient *logos* that developed through the

work of the Greek philosophers did not supplant the belief in myth but existed alongside it: reason, in the form of the ancient logos was, as Vernant notes, always at risk from the persistence of familiar and comforting myths whose truths were likely to be delivered with a rhetorical skill sufficient to effect those who heard its tales 'in the manner of an incantation' (Vernant, 1988: 206). Yet, within the mythos, it was still believed that the gestures and utterances of 'reckless' and 'headstrong' men, in particular, were able to harness this inhuman power, or become at one with it (Lincoln, 1996: 3-4).

But to keep the main point within grasp – the idea that chance is in some ways inhuman and machinic – it is enough to note that the significance of the modern calculating machine is not simply that it signals a new ontology (a probabilistic conception of existence) but that it provides a vivid illustration of the way we deal with the inhuman in modernity: we build machines that take the place of the gods, or the God, that once served as the source of a cosmological mysteriousness.

Babbage's various machines, or the much earlier machines of others such as German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz (in the 1670s), illustrate the possibility of freedom from domination by external and non-human regulating powers (the gods, fate, and so on) as well as the associated mythical beliefs such dependence produced. First, mechanistic philosophy and, later, modernity more generally render these superfluous to an understanding of reality. In doing so, however, this logic of calculation, as Harvie Ferguson notes, displaces the centrality of the cosmological mystery, but does not remove it: instead it is encountered at a subjective level as an ontological surplus; which is to say, through the uncertainties of a being able to touch a reality that is *in excess* of what is known (Ferguson, 1990: 159-60).

This is the problem that takes up Heidegger's interest in *Being and Time.* We see it in his notion of *Dasein,* which refers to being as outside of, or

proximate to, itself ('"towards oneself", the 'back to', and 'letting oneself be encountered-*by*'") (Heidegger, 1978: 329). In other words, for Heidegger, we moderns are in many ways condemned to see reality as excessive; we exist in such *ecstases* of time and space. One implication of this is that we may also self-consciously plunge into the surplus.

GAMES OF CHANCE: ONTOLOGICAL EXCESS

Writing and reflection on the philosophical status of games of chance offer abundant examples of their close identification with existential conditions and experiences, something that can perhaps be most usefully illustrated by a scene from Karel Reisz and James Toback's 1974 film, *The Gambler.* What we see is a view of the seemingly impassive character of Axel Freed – the gambler of the title – standing beneath the ceiling lights of some Las Vegas casino which, from our perspective, form a saintly nimbus around his slightly-bowed head (see Figure 1).[3] This is an image whose elements are familiar enough to those who are acquainted with religious iconography: Axel's devotional posture suggests that he is under the sway of a greater power and may have momentarily taken leave of himself or entered some altered state. The drama that unfolds as the film proceeds merely confirms this to be the case.

   In the scene in question Axel has just staked every last dollar he has on a hand of blackjack. Watching by his side is his companion Billie, who tells him he is insane. 'Yes,' he agrees calmly, 'but I'm also blessed.' In the game of blackjack a winning hand amounts to twenty-one. Axel has eighteen on two cards, with a third yet to be dealt.

1. James Caan as Axel in *The Gambler,* 1974 (*Dir:* Karel Reisz)

He does not take heed of the odds, which are clearly against him, but doubles his bet – an outrageous wager considering that any card with a numerical value of more than three will break him. But Axel draws encouragement from the blessings he feels have been bestowed upon him during a day-long winning streak and uses his cards almost like sacramental offerings that are merely working to extract the required favours from God. As we reach the climax of this central scene he then utters the words that will allow him to transcend the reality of the world of reason: 'give me the three', he says, as if in direct contact with the divine automaton and the dealer turns over his final card to reveal the three of hearts.

The kind of threshold gambling that Axel takes part in throughout this film complicates the modern idea of experience as progressive movement, because here it is instead played-out in a series of disappearances – ecstatic moments – which transport Axel beyond the confines of normal social life.

In sharp contrast to the temporal constraints of the modern world – limited and reachable horizons – Axel floats into a timeless and ahistorical current where fate is steering him and in which the mobsters on the other side of the country who are out to kill him no longer matter, because in this moment, crowned by his halo, he has neither being nor existence in the strict sense we attach to these terms. He has ascended to the ranks of the blessed, transcended the organic body. This is the experience of chance as an all-consuming ontological excess.

This Axel – loosely based on two of Fyodor Dostoevsky's characters: Alexei in *The Gambler* and the so-called 'Underground Man' from his earlier *Notes from Underground* – exemplifies the observation of Mikhail Bakhtin that in much of Dostoevsky's fiction we find not the bounded modern subject, but examples of existential dispersal, if not a desire to vanish, seemingly driven by an idea that 'a man must never coincide with himself.' And thus, as with Axel / Alexei, 'the formula of identity, A = A' does not apply (Bakhtin, 1984: 59). Like his counterpart in Dostoevsky's original story, Axel is under the sway of the (divine) automaton of chance and has nothing but contempt for how reason might serve as a guide to the best way to live.

To become at one with chance was to be an automaton, an *apparently* self-moving being, whose motive power and 'actions' remained a mystery to baffled onlookers. In Dostoevsky's case it entailed, as Boris Christa notes, an 'existential sensation of draining the cup of experience to the dregs'; of, in fact, disappearing:

> Nothing, [Dostoevsky] assures us, can compare with the feeling of being alone in a strange country, not knowing where the next meal will come from, and then staking one's 'very, very last gulden' on the turn of a roulette wheel (Christa, 2002: 106).

Famously, Dostoevsky did plunge into the ontological surplus himself, thereby making Alexei – for posterity – a kind of literary double. He spent extended periods gambling intensely and actually emerged after one losing run with this short novel, *The Gambler,* as payment for debts he had racked up at the roulette tables during an extensive bout of this so-called 'fever' that was said to assail him periodically (MacAndrew, 1981: 4-5). Thus, it is no surprise to see that the experiences of his fictional gambler, glorying in indeterminacy and seeking ecstatic transport, are not only mirrored in his own real-life correspondence from this time, but also provide a much imitated template for a variety of fictional and biographical accounts by other gamblers, many of which are also literary doubles.[4]

From these sources we gain some understanding of how chance is experienced as something divine or sacred and how an attachment to games of chance puts in motion an existence directed towards disappearances. Desire, Dostoevsky's Underground Man remarks, was what had more than once forced him into a kind of nowhere and what it left was mere husk of a self, which was thereafter always at risk of being broken, reduced to bits (Dostoevsky, 1972: 35). Yet, the submission to the inhuman dimensions of chance comes to exemplify something that is very modern; namely, the power of the unknown – in the shape of the future, or of one's own sense of historicity – to shape life.

THE MYTHOS AS DRAMATIC SCENARIO

The spatio-temporal dimension of gambling, then, can be understood in terms of Heidegger's *Dasein,* which points to the *ek-static* nature of being. Thus, subjective movement to a point of disappearance becomes a singular moment of ek-stasis, which literally means 'standing out' and, as such, 're-

fers to the fact that, in temporalizing itself, *Dasein* is always already "beyond" itself in the world' (Macann, 1993: 100). Hence, we might understand the effect of chance by thinking of it in terms of the kind of mythical or superstitious responses it gives rise to. Recall, as I noted above, that subjectivity is absent in the mythos and that there was no distinction between subject and world as we find in modernity. In other words, there was no outside perspective from which nature was seen as *object* and thus no perspective from which chance becomes (as in the modern account) this calculable force to be mastered, nor – as with gambling – this ontological excess that can be gone into.

Its cosmological dimensions, as Blumenberg wrote in his *Work on Myth*, were characterized by 'powers that could be appealed to, that could be turned away from or toward one' (Blumenberg, 1985: 13). But in such an existence there was no position exterior to the mythos: all within the world's unique singularity took part in what might as well have been a coincidence of events that were played out according to an already existing script (in contemporary virtual games this becomes the unknown algorithm). This is close to one sense of the term 'mythos' as used by Aristotle in his *Poetics,* where, as Fernand Hallyn notes, the word refers to the careful arrangement of events in a dramatic scenario (Hallyn, 1990: 13-14). Clearly, in this example, the 'actors' within a drama or game are not the same as legislating agents – modern autonomous actors/subjects – but more like bit-players who can contribute to and illuminate, a tale.

In such a way, the mythos more generally reveals itself through unfolding events that are interpreted then as actions. For Nietzsche, as Hans Blumenberg notes, the idea that causal efficacy rests not with the subject but in inanimate and non-human forces was 'the characterizing mark of all mythologies' and the source of animism or 'magic' (Blumenberg, 1985: 13). In the

myth world such an orientation to the reality is manifested in the practice of throwing or casting lots which, as Richard Onians noted, was a means of rousing some fundamental causal force:

> The lots (and possibly the vessel from which they were shaken) were either credited with a virtue of their own, possibly even consciousness, ensuring the right decision as the balance of might, or [alternatively were] thought to be controlled by powers who thus revealed their will (Onians, 1988: 393).

Such a controlling power also corresponds to the aforementioned 'divine automaton' (Bryant, 2003: 248). Of course, dicing and casting lots persist in gambling. But the more important parallel between the world of myth and the reality of games of chance is that vestiges of the mythical or archaic persist and infuse the lifeworld of the modern gambler on multiple levels (Reith, 1999). The premodern superstitions of gamblers – manifested not only in the form of dreams or premonitions, fetishes and good luck charms, but in omens and utterances that reach out to chance and request to be drawn in to its mysteries – illustrate that the gambler has already been taken in by an archaic and unscientific understanding of the world or, in Gerda Reith's terms, a 'magico-religious' worldview (1990: 156-181).

Returning to *The Gambler,* examples of this are apparent throughout the film. In addition to those already mentioned we see, for instance, Axel at odds with a fellow player when they get to discussing what is happening in some in-progress basketball games on which he has a lot of money riding. Axel objects to the idea that events can be understood in terms of 'latest scores' and suggests that there is something much bigger going on – as if the gods are moving in his favour – when he says 'Scores? These aren't scores, they're omens,' drawing out that word for effect – '*o-m-e-n-s.*'

Yet despite such trust in fate, we know that Axel *is* a modern man. In his wagering he comes from a position in which he can objectify his position in the world – he knows, for instance, that reason has separated itself from chance; it is a source of dismay for him and he willfully chooses to destroy everything that attempts to keep these two worlds from touching each other. Thus, where games of chance were once clearly a means of divine communication, now they permit him to *plunge in* to the ontological excess from a seemingly external space-time (that of the bounded and finite rational world), to be transported to a causality in which the distinction between the player and the game becomes quite complicated. What it implies is that the player is played by chance and not the other way around. This is to be in the midst of things; something that marks the 'experience' as one of repetitive or automatic motion – an out of body experience.

If we look to Roger Caillois's *Man, Play and Games* (originally published in 1961)*,* and its typologies of games and the explorations of how these reflect a variety of altered states, it is interesting to see that the language used to describe such games is echoed later in the descriptions Jean Baudrillard would use to suggest that the features of contemporary life produce an integral reality (a reality that absorbs all negativity) characterized by what he terms 'the object', which is not merely the object world, but the world of 'inert and dumb phenomena' that seems often to push us around and determine our reality (Caillois, 2001; Baudrillard, 2003: 3-5).

Caillois notes, for instance, that certain kinds of play combine elements of 'simulation' (the state of being another, of removal from oneself which, he writes, 'tends to alienate and transport') and 'vertigo' (a whirling or falling; dizziness and disorder), which, he believed, could give way to 'an indescribable metamorphosis in the condition of existence' that 'seems to remove the

2 . The final scene from *The Gambler*. Axel admires the wound that confirms his proximity to the real of chance

player far from the authority, values, and influence of the real world' to drift towards 'the sacred' (Caillois, 2001: 75-76). And for the sacred we might read the other-than-human, the inhuman or, even, incalculable chance, which becomes for our gambler more tangible than the world in which things are fixed and predictable.

This brings me to the concluding scenes in the film adaptation of *The Gambler,* which sees Axel return to the university where he is a professor of literature (teaching Dostoevsky, of course). There, under pressure from Mafia money lenders, he is forced to bribe one of his students – the star player of the basketball team – and convince him to deliberately lose a match in order that his creditors can recover the huge sums he has lost gambling. When the desired outcome is achieved and the fixed game frees him from

the clutches of the mobsters it signals for Axel a reality that he cannot bear to live with: namely, that the game – any game – has a known outcome and that when all is said and done, the game is about something as grubby as money. This fact draws him back from the ecstasies of nowhere to the grim realties of life. And in order to reintroduce chance into his life he immediately heads for danger and almost gets killed in a bar brawl, but survives. Blessed once more.

The last frames of the film show Axel catching himself in a mirror and smiling proudly at the gaping wound on his face; a wound that signifies that the game of chance can never entirely be controlled.

TIME ON THE THRESHOLD

If myths and superstitions are ways in which the absolutism of reality was held at a distance, then the gestures and paraphernalia of games of chance – dice, cards, randomly drawn lots, and so on – allow us to illustrate the divergent ontological assumptions in archaic and modern belief. In archaic practice such objects were used, as it were, sacramentally, in recognition of the divine automaton and did not constitute an attempt to break out of reality, precisely because there was no such idea that one could step outside of life and assume the agency of an historical actor (Spariosu, 1989: 15). Modern games of chance differ from divination because they assume that the hold of reality can be broken and that the ecstatic moment brings us into contact with the inhuman. Wagering assumes agency, but it also reveals that there is a point beyond which the player is transformed into a toy of chance, seemingly subject to a repetition compulsion.

Yet in such wagering – and even the make-believe of virtual reality games – we can perhaps glimpse their connections to the modern desire to master

nature and objectify the world. Indeed, while the masochistic compulsion to repeat that Freud, for instance, identified in Dostoevsky's gambling reflects more generally his notion of the death drive, or in the words of Teresa de Lauretis, a desire to be 'inorganic', we should not ignore the similarity of this kind of repetition to apparently less pathological – indeed, avowedly rational – practices that both reflect the separation of subject from world whilst also attempting to reconfigure the context within which experience can take place (Freud, 2001: 175-198; de Lauretis, 2003: 552).

For Avital Ronell, the experimental method of modern science engages an active-passive mode of being that explores and institutes repeatability as a 'test drive' underpinning not merely the sciences – which *simulates* and tests alternative realities with all the skill of make-believe – but modern life more generally (Ronell, 2005). Thus, it is through the prevalence of experiences like examinations, job interviews, and the requirement to be prepared for retraining and redeployment as the economy demands, that we become prepared for the possibility that life and reality as we know it can be reconfigured to leave us temporarily displaced, not at one with ourselves.

The active-passive disposition we see in wagering and in scientific testing is also common to altered states in general, including those induced by substance addiction (Ronell, 2003: 59-73). What these share with other ecstatic diversions induced by states of hypnosis, sleep, madness, perceptual illusion and so on arise from the fact that they are all characteristically indeterminate conditions that unfold around the threshold of subjective control. So if there is any 'trigger' for the disappearance of self we might suggest that it is intimately related to modern embodied subjectivity and the unknown futures that are held up as potential sources of enrichment for it. The most vivid gambling literature, which includes fictions, memoirs, and mixtures of both forms, indicates that gambling establishes its hold as the result of tak-

ing seriously the consequences of being modern – which is to say, through the belief that one is an historical actor existing in a temporal flow that can be directed or mastered.

If our vision of Axel with his radiant halo reveals him, in the end, to be no more than a puppet of the automaton of chance, it is only because he first willed an outcome that his co-creator James Toback called 'a permanent condition of transcendence.' This can only exist in the 'death' of the subject (Dempsey, 1980-81: 26). The active-passive testing disposition, as described by Avital Ronell, may provide an account of how the determined and autonomous subject (who, we must remember) gives birth to the gambler, can also turn into the *will-less* automaton of chance:

> Being tested, which brings together attempter with the tempting does not fall purely into the zone of action or its purported other – passivity – but engages both at once. Already the locution 'being tested,' always awkward and slightly wrenching, invites the intervention of the passive where action or at least some activity is indicated (Ronell, 2005: 143).

In letters to his faraway wife, Anya, dating from the height of his gambling fever, Dostoevsky tried to convey the power that took hold of him when he stood at the roulette tables, as time after time he determinedly went into the play firmly believing that he had the power to compete with chance. Inevitably what we read are descriptions of just the opposite: he became merely a plaything of its greater force (Koteliansky, 1926). Yet he was experiencing existence as something pure, as something extra-human. The sense of physical abduction, which pushes the repetition of play to disastrous ends, comes through in descriptions of the body in pain, under the direction of unknown motivations, or as Dostoevsky's wife recalled, bound by gambling's 'chains' (Koteliansky, 1926: 136).

Indeed, as Bakhtin revealed, Dostoevsky consciously intended to draw a temporal parallel between his account of gambling and his portrayal of imprisonment in *House of the Dead:*

> The life of convicts and the life of gamblers – for all their differences in content – are equally *life taken out of life* (that is, taken out of common, ordinary life) [...] And the *time* of penal servitude and the *time* of gambling are – for all their profound differences – an identical *type of time,* similar to the final moments of consciousness before execution or suicide, similar in general to the time of crisis. All this is time on the *threshold* (Bakhtin, 1984: 172).

Myth, as Hans Blumenberg suggested, develops as a response to the anxiety of confronting the total power of a world beyond one's control; of existing on the threshold of two worlds and potentially having to repeatedly face death or crises of some sort. This anxiety, in itself, is pathological – or, in other words, simply produces the repetition that perpetuates the hold it manages to exercise over the imagination (Blumenberg, 1985: 6).

We can see an example of this in a scene from Dostoevsky's *The Gambler,* in which a character known as 'the General' appears at the roulette table, under the watchful eye of Alexei, who looks on as he places a bet. The General slowly takes 'three hundred francs in gold' and puts them on the black, as Alexei recounts:

> The black won. He didn't pick up his winnings, but left them on the table. The black won again. He left them again. And when the red won that time, he lost twelve hundred francs in one go. I am convinced that black cats were clawing at his heart, and that if the stake had been twice or perhaps three times greater, he would have lost control and showed his agitation (Dostoevsky, 1981: 30).

According to Bakhtin, such descriptions form part of the 'kind of hell' Dostoevsky wanted to present in *The Gambler* in order to demonstrate the ease with which gambling at the limit of control reduces the player to nothing, a mere plaything of chance (Bakhtin, 1984: 172). Here money loses the associations that sustain its relation to value in the day-to-day world, where it is attached to things that are substantial – those items we exchange it for – and where it leaves traces all around. In games of chance money simply disappears to be abstracted into a mere token that will produce varying levels of pleasure or violence, as Alexei finds when he is compelled to recklessly play all of his remaining money as if it was the last opportunity he would ever have in his life: 'I became frantic, seized the remaining two thousand gulden, and threw them on the first twelve numbers – just like that, without any calculation.' And again, in a description that speaks of possession: 'In a daze, I pushed all that pile onto the red, but then I suddenly came to my senses. Cold fear ran down my spine and made my hands and legs tremble' (Dostoevsky, 1981: 144).

The fact that money never quite manifests itself as real value and remains always fluid prepares the way for the eventual stripping away that is acted upon the player given over to the ecstasy of the game. The truth about money, as Marx saw, was that when you got right down to it, it was a very mysterious thing. It is neither one specific thing, nor another; yet this gives it the 'magic' or 'occult' powers that allow it to be the universal equivalent (Marx, 1954: 96, 152). It is 'the Philosopher's Stone the alchemists have sought in vain' (Marx in Asendorf, 1993: 30). And this quality of money, Jean Baudrillard thought, was what makes gambling 'extraordinary' (Baudrillard, 1999: 183). It is 'the locus of both ecstasy and the disappearance of value' because:

in gambling money is neither produced nor destroyed, but disappears as value and re-emerges as appearance, restored to its pure appearance through the instantaneous reversibility of winning and losing (Baudrillard, 1999: 183).

This reversibility is the switch that alternates experience between the reality and the virtual.

THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE

The spatially indeterminate, virtual and unbounded vistas of the network are found through the portal of the personal computer screen (and its miniature portable offspring). These are machines designed for instant access, repetition, and a kind of ecstatic transport that takes us into different experiential spaces. Now, without any need for any actual movement to places where games of chance were once contained and controlled, the transport of sensory experience the Dostoevskian gambler found can be achieved through virtual reality technologies. Ecstatic removal now predominantly resides in the limitless domains opened up by a reality entertained by the chance encounter, by reverie and by limitless novelties. A perhaps less toxic version of this reality exists in the user-generated content of what is known as Web 2.0 and found in websites such as flickr.com, which on the one hand perfectly illustrate the network as a universe of potentially infinite and pleasurable coincidences, but more importantly speak of a culture in which we need 'hits' 'fixes' and the continual stimulation that the logic of 'surfing' life promises.

   Via these machines, the new automata of an indeterminate and excessive ontological reality, chance is forever loosened from the materiality of the old fashioned calculating machine, which gave us limited mastery over uncer-

tainty. Today's network is a route into mythic time – time out of time – in which ceaselessly weaving interconnections promise to spread subjectivity amongst what Erik Davis calls their 'complex fabrics of unpredictable and semiautonomous threads' (Davis, 2004: 384). This, too, is a disappearance. Thus to understand the truth of the view that games of chance have truly found their time it is necessary to understand how, in contemporary life, myth can meet with reality in a so-called virtual space that is nonetheless a site of real experimentation.

In the technologized life of an online surfer, the computer becomes an ecstasy machine; it promises potentially, if not actually, even more than one can desire. Where games of chance are concerned it promises the Dostoevskian gambler's contact with the real of chance; the possibility of being played oneself by the machine – through an immediacy of experience that is further guaranteed by the development of a near pure gambling market that 'mainlines' hits more effectively and with fewer obstacles to their attainment than any drug probably ever could. Now, peer-to-peer wagering – unmediated by the limitations of bookmakers or casinos – promises to open up the virtual world to new and baffling encounters, sort of aleatoric Turing tests (are the people on the other end real? Does it matter?), with strange and faceless players who might be located anywhere in the world seeing as the spatial indeterminacy of the networked experience establishes online existence *precisely* as a nowhere.

Yet, to be nowhere in this sense is to be at the centre of it all; in the midst of the action. Thus, by its very own logic of 'loosening person-to-place contiguity requirements' the techno-ecstatic network opens a wormhole into the void (Mitchell, 2003: 144). Now players can 'propose a wager' on anything that seems appealing to them, and 'then reach out to everyone else on the network', perhaps as a Zeus or Achilles would in their day have consult-

ed their mythical gods with the dice to settle a dispute, but now – and no less importantly – it is 'to find a taker for the bet' that will affirm one's existence (Landow, 2006: 366).

In gambling terms, the nowhere of the network is Las Vegas taken to an unprecedented pitch of intensity: it takes 'play money' and makes it vanish in a way the gambling chip could never match. The irony is that this spatial indeterminacy – of being nowhere or diffused in the network – gains *its* reality, its hold on life, as William Mitchell notes, because of *virtual* money (2003: 144). The strange reality of a credit economy in these techno-ecstatic conditions is indicated by the fact that it creates another level of distance from the reality of a world of Lockean primary qualities (namely, those things we can touch and feel and quantify). Virtual money – a simple credit card, for instance – is already an *ek-static* conceit in the way it allows us to extend ourselves into an as yet unknown future and to pay for the experiences we have today at some later date.

Indeed, what is more appropriate than to point to the similarity between these conditions and the so-called 'futures' market developed in the 1970s to trade in 'intangible [stock] options' and the 'futures' of currencies (Taylor, 2004: 168). These 'futures' or 'junk bonds' (so-called because their high-risk status indicated their possible rapid transformation to negative value, or nothing) were traded in a system that was set up by the Chicago Board of Trade and actually *based* on the example of the high-stakes Las Vegas casino (Taylor, 2004: 168). This is the meta level of MacKenzie Wark's (2007) gamespace – the economic reality of life today. At the subjective level it feeds into the ideology of life as a game that can be mastered.

Add to the mix a network of limitless dimensions that is potentially available to all – not simply traders playing with the money of others – and in which gambling (amidst the abundance of porn, pirated media, and all the

other diversions available on tap) signifies a 'hit' *par excellence.* Then we have a shape-shifting beyond and real of chance that may be accessed at any time, and in which subjective proximity to total reversal and disappearance takes on those Dostoevskian proportions I have discussed.

The dangers of *ek-static* – virtual – money were anticipated by the earliest theorists of the digital age, with Arthur Kroker and Michael Weinstein, for instance, foreseeing our current economic travails in the meeting of freely circulating information with virtual money:

> we speak of money as suddenly hyper-driven and flipped into virtual, twenty-four hour data exchanges, of the slip-streaming of consciousness [...] then we can also finally know virtual economy as a fatal, delirious, crash-event (Kroker and Weinstein, 1994: 77).

In such times, the danger is that we may become 'celebrants of amnesia' and 'agents of forgetfulness' (Kroker and Weinstein, 1994: 77).

NOTES

1. This usage of the term 'automaton' is not to be confused with what Harvie Ferguson has described as the 'image' of the *human body* as an automaton, which was found in Renaissance and early modern thought and influenced by Newtonian physics. An example is found in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, where the human agent is described as driven by cogs, springs, and wheels. In other words, the human is 'a self-moving or self-adjusting mechanism' (Ferguson, 1997: 4).

2. The term 'computer', too, gets us mixed up in similar 'human or machine?' confusions, as Simon Schaffer notes: 'as with terms such as *typewriter,* the word *computer* here [in relation to Babbage] referred to a human being, in this case the hireling employed to perform the exhausting reckoning' required by astro-

nomical observations. 'Babbage himself applied for the post of computer at the Royal Observatory, in summer 1814, until dissuaded from the thankless task' (Shaffer, 1994: 203).

3. Karel Reisz (dir.) *The Gambler* [film], from a screenplay by James Toback (Universal Pictures, 1974). When no page number is cited I am quoting from the film's dialogue.

4. It may be no more than coincidence that the best gambling memoirs are accompanied, as was Dostoevsky's real-life experiences of gambling, by fictional or semi-fictional counterparts, or it may simply be a manifestation of a need, also achieved in writing, to create alternative realities. Amongst these twins are Frederick Barthelme's (1997) novel *Bob the Gambler* and the memoir written with his brother, Steven (1999), entitled *Double Down: Reflections on Gambling and Loss;* Jack Richardson's (1980) *Memoirs of a Gambler* and his biographical play *Xmas in Las Vegas* (1972)*;* Jonathan Rendall's (1999) semi-fictional *Twelve Grand,* some of which reflects parts of his (1997) memoir, *This Bloody Mary is the Last Thing I Own;* and finally there is James Toback's screenplay of *The Gambler,* in which the character of Axel reflects not just those characters of Dostoevsky's I have noted, but is based also in Toback's life as a university professor and gambler. On this latter point, see Dempsey (1980-81: 24-35). Indeed, all of the above – aside from Dostoevsky and Rendall – were also, at one time or another, academics.

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