

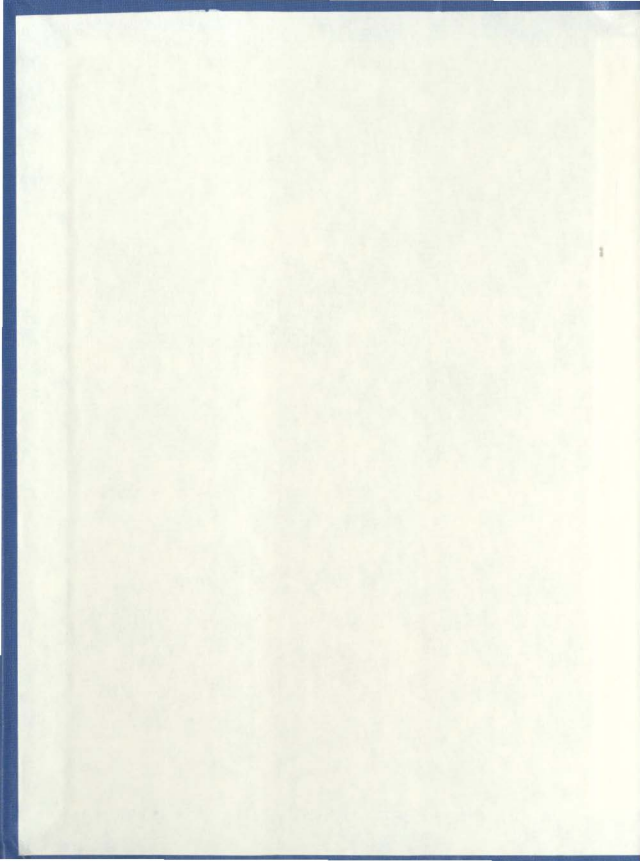
GAMBLING ON THE FUTURE:
VIDEO LOTTERY TERMINALS AND SOCIAL CHANGE
IN RURAL NEWFOUNDLAND

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**GAMBLING ON THE FUTURE: VIDEO LOTTERY TERMINALS
AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN RURAL NEWFOUNDLAND**

by

Reade Davis

A thesis submitted to the
School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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St. John's

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the roles played by video lottery terminals (VLTs) in the lives of twenty-five regular gamblers living in a rural, fishery-dependent region of eastern Newfoundland. The introduction of VLTs into these communities occurred during a particularly dynamic historical period. The sudden availability of electronic gambling machines in clubs throughout the province during the early 1990s coincided closely with the federal government's declaration of a moratorium on the fishery for northern cod, the economic staple of the region. The restructuring of social and economic life that was induced by the fishery closure, and the resulting compensation programs, helped to create conditions in which the playing of VLTs assumed tremendous importance in the lives of certain area residents. These changes, in conjunction with a long history of economic dependency, stimulated the development of a distinct set of values which influenced the ways in which players learned to relate to each other, and to the machines.

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I dedicate this thesis to my parents. In the certainty of their love, I have found the strength to carry on. To my father Eric, who has been my beacon of wisdom and calm, even through the stormiest seas. I could not have asked for a finer role model. To my mother Emmy. For giving me the courage to follow my heart, whatever the consequences. Your irrepressible zest for life is an endless source of inspiration for me. As if that weren't enough, you guys make pretty mean editors too.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

ALC: Atlantic Lottery Corporation

EI: Employment Insurance (Unemployment Insurance)

GA: Gambler's Anonymous

NCARP: Northern Cod Adjustment and Retraining Program

NCW: National Council of Welfare

NF: Newfoundland

TAGS: The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy

VLT: Video Lottery Terminal

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INTRODUCTION: VLTs AND NEWFOUNDLAND OUTPORT LIFE

The introduction of video lottery terminal (VLT) gambling into rural Newfoundland communities occurred during a particularly dynamic historical period. The sudden availability of electronic gambling machines in clubs¹ throughout the province in the early 1990s coincided closely with the federal government's declaration of a moratorium on the fishery for northern cod, the economic staple of many outport communities. The restructuring of social and economic life that was induced by the fishery closure, and the resulting compensation programs, helped to create conditions in which the playing of VLTs assumed tremendous importance in the lives of a certain segment of the population. These changes also stimulated the development of a distinct set of values which, in turn, influenced the ways in which players learned to relate to each other, and to the machines.

This thesis explores the roles played by VLTs in the lives of twenty-five heavy gamblers living in a string of coastal, cod-fishing communities in eastern Newfoundland. This sample is not intended to be representative of the entire VLT playing community, but rather aims to capture a sense of what motivated this set of people to devote so much of their time and money to playing gambling machines. Many players described their attachment to VLTs in terms of the emotional satisfaction that playing gave them. Most of these people focussed on the feelings of excitement, relaxation, or mental stimulation they experienced while playing. Beyond these individual-level variables, however, a variety of socially-based motivations were at work as well. In the wake of

¹'Club' is the locally used term for a bar or tavern.

the high unemployment and extreme shifts in income that characterized the moratorium period, clubs took on an added social significance. The newly arrived VLTs provided fertile ground for the fostering of a new sense of community, when the loss of the fishery had left previous affiliations in doubt.

Although most players described the experience of playing VLTs in a positive light, many expressed concern that they were spending more money than they could afford. The majority of the players had experienced some kind of financial or personal problems which they attributed to their gambling. As a result, most voiced an interest in cutting down on their gambling or quitting altogether. Though a few were successful in reducing their spending, others found that they were unable to keep their gambling in check. In an effort to make sense of their failed attempts, many players had come to embrace the concept of 'gambling addiction.' A much smaller number looked to the importance of social and situational pressures in leading them to spend too much.

Underlying my approach to this topic is the conviction that human practices cannot be adequately studied outside of the social and cultural context in which they exist. Following Apt, Smith, and Christiansen, I have come to believe that: "the 'worlds of reality' gamblers inhabit are largely situational - and not the autonomous creations of individual psyches ... the structure of their experience relies heavily on socially constructed systems of meaning: on norms and ideologies that define games, playing strategies, and what constitutes winning and losing..." (1985: 16-17) This differs from many previous studies of VLT gambling which have emphasized universalistic psychological principles and personality types, to the neglect of contextual variables.

1.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1.1.1 THE LEGALIZATION OF GAMBLING IN CANADA: THE CASE OF VLTs

Most Canadian gambling prohibitions have their roots in English statute law. The most significant strand of laws has been traced back to a statute that was passed in 1338 when King David II feared losing all of his skilled archers to 'idle games of dice.' As a result, all games except for archery were prohibited (Osborne and Campbell 1988). Eventually, this prohibition was expanded to include a number of other games of chance. The English legislation was eventually extended to Canada as the 'new world' was colonized. After Canada's confederation, the various gaming laws were consolidated into a general statute relating to lotteries and gaming. Many aspects of this statute were still evident in the first Criminal Code of 1892. They changed little during the first three quarters of the twentieth century (Ibid.).

It is only in the last thirty years that Canadian public policy toward gambling has become more permissive.² The trend toward greater leniency in the regulation of gambling began 1969, when the Liberal government of Pierre Elliot Trudeau amended the Criminal Code to allow a national lottery to raise money for the 1976 Olympic Games (Ibid.). Under the new arrangement, Federal and Provincial governments were permitted to conduct and manage lotteries. Later that year, several provinces established such enterprises.³ Lotteries very quickly emerged as a lucrative source of provincial government revenues, offering an appealing alternative to raising taxes or deficit finance (Campbell and Smith 1998).

²This trend has been paralleled by a similar relaxing of gambling prohibitions in many other industrialized nations including: Britain, the United States, Australia, and Germany.

³Newfoundland did not follow suit until 1983.

A second major legislative change occurred in 1985, when the Progressive Conservative government of Joe Clark added the "Lotteries Amendment Act" to the Criminal Code. This granted exclusive jurisdiction over gambling related industries to the provincial governments in exchange for an annual payment of eighteen million dollars (in 1985 dollars)⁴ (Perrier Mandal et al. 1999: 83). Under this structure gambling continues to be illegal if operated by private interests. Provincial governments, and the lottery corporations they operate, enjoy a legislated monopoly over the provision of betting games to municipalities under their jurisdiction. Municipalities themselves, by contrast, were not granted any legal control over the forms of gambling practised within their boundaries, nor were they granted a formal voice in determining the ways in which revenues derived from this gambling are spent (Seelig and Seelig 1998).

In a less publicized move in the same year (1985), the Criminal Code was again amended to allow the provinces to manage video devices and slot machines.⁵ The significance of this decision did not become fully apparent until 1990, when the government of New Brunswick introduced the first legal VLTs to Canada. Three years later, VLTs could be found in all provinces except for Ontario and British Columbia⁶ (Perrier Mandal et al. 1999: 154). The machines proved to be an instant success in many parts of the country, leading most provincial

⁴It is estimated that in 1996 federal coffers swelled by \$50.3 million, its share of lottery proceeds, and \$70 million in Goods and Services Tax (GST) extracted from various lottery corporations (Perrier Mandal et al. 1999: 83).

⁵The first appearance of video lottery terminals in North America occurred in 1983, when the state of Nebraska installed the gambling machines in taverns (Apt 1996).

⁶Both of these provinces continue to prohibit VLTs. While Ontario has allowed for the widespread availability of slot machines instead, British Columbia only permits slot machines at charity casinos (Perrier Mandal et al. 1999).

governments to steadily increase their numbers throughout the early nineties (Ibid., 1999).

VLTs were first introduced to the province of Newfoundland by the Atlantic Lottery Corporation (ALC) in December of 1990, making it the second province in Canada to bring in the machines. The ALC, which is co-owned by the four Atlantic provinces, had already been in the business of providing Newfoundlanders with sweepstakes-style lottery tickets, scratch and win tickets, and breakopen tickets, since the early eighties (Ibid.). After operating expenses, the profits earned by the ALC are split between the four provinces, proportionate to the amount of money wagered in each.

It is the responsibility of individual governments to enact legislation to regulate any forms of gambling that operate within their jurisdictional boundaries. In Newfoundland, as with most other Canadian provinces, most of the administration of gambling games falls under the command of the Department of Finance. The one notable exception is the treatment of 'problem gambling,' which is delegated to the Department of Health and Community Services (Dicks 1997).

All VLTs in Newfoundland and Labrador are restricted to licensed establishments, and each establishment is limited to a maximum of five machines.⁷ Though most rural communities in the province did not receive VLTs until after 1992, the number of clubs with machines has grown steadily throughout the decade. By 1999, there were 2,437 VLTs in about five hundred establishments in the province (Stuckless 1999: 17). This corresponds to approximately one machine for every 163 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians over the age of 19.⁸

⁷Establishments with more than one liquor license, such as a bar with a separately licensed pool room, are entitled to five machines for each license (Dicks 1997).

⁸This calculation is based on a figure of 396,362 people aged 20 years and over in 1996 (Statistics Canada 1999).

VLT players in the province are allowed to wager anywhere from five cents to two dollars and fifty cents per spin, and stand to win a maximum of five hundred dollars on any given spin if they are betting the full amount. The revenues taken in by the machines, after ALC operating expenses⁹, are then divided between the government (75.25%) and the site owner (24.75%)¹⁰ (Atlantic Lottery Corporation 2000).

Provincial government spokespersons have been quite candid about their attachment to VLT revenues. As former Finance Minister Paul Dicks told the St. John's Evening Telegram in 1997: "The real truth is that once you get the revenues, you more or less become dependent on them" (Cleary 1997: 2). Indeed, VLTs have proven to be a very profitable investment for the government. As Table 1.1 shows, net receipts from VLTs in Newfoundland and Labrador increased steadily throughout the 1990s, culminating in just under \$84.5 million in net receipts for the 1998-1999 fiscal year. (ALC 1999). This figure translates into about \$57 million in profits for the provincial government (Stuckless 1999: 16).

⁹In 1998-1999, the ALC cut was roughly ten percent of the gross VLT sales in the province. (ALC 1999)

¹⁰If net revenue for the club exceeds \$400,000, the ratio changes to 80.2% (for the government) and 19.8% (for the establishment) (Atlantic Lottery Corporation 2000)

Table 1.1 Net Video Lottery Terminal Sales in Newfoundland and Labrador by Fiscal Year*

Fiscal Year	Atlantic Lottery Corporation Net Video Lottery Terminal Sales in Newfoundland and Labrador (\$ millions)	% Increase from Previous Fiscal Year
1998-1999	84.5	23.4%
1997-1998	68.5	12.7%
1996-1997	60.8	4.1%
1995-1996	58.4	17.5%
1994-1995	49.7	32.5%
1993-1994	37.5	52.4%
1992-1993	24.6	105.0%
1991-1992	12	N/A

*Data obtained from Atlantic Lottery Corporation Annual Reports (1992-1999).

Despite the economic importance of VLTs to the provincial government, it is important to keep in mind that the machines are only one component, albeit a major component, of a wide range of legal gambling opportunities that Newfoundlanders have gained access to in the last fifteen years. In addition to the almost \$85 million in VLT expenditures in the 1998-99 fiscal year, Newfoundland gamblers also spent: more than \$40 million on sweepstakes-style lotteries, such as Lotto 649 and Super 7; and more than \$60 million on breakopen tickets. In total, ALC sales in the province for that year totalled \$239.7 million (Stuckless 1999: 16). This is an average of \$604.75 per person over the age of 19.¹¹ That is more than the payroll or income tax collected in the province for that year (Stuckless 1999: 17).

¹¹This calculation is based on a figure of 396,362 people aged 20 years and over in 1996 (Statistics Canada 1999).

1.1.2 THE UNIQUENESS OF THE SETTING

This study draws primarily on fieldwork conducted in three clubs located within a string of small outport communities along the shore of a large bay in eastern Newfoundland. In total, these communities are home to approximately three thousand people, and make up a discrete census district.¹² All of the communities are within an hour's drive of a much more densely populated area which serves as a regional service centre for people in the region. The centre has a number of clubs of its own, however. While some people from the outports visit clubs in the centre when they are travelling on other business, very few people from the centre use the outport clubs with any regularity.

Because of the particularly sensitive nature of this material, the string of outports will henceforth be referred to under the pseudonym: 'The Barren Shore.' This name struck me as being the most appropriate because it combines the two most important geographic features of the region: "*the shore*," and "*the barrens*," which the Dictionary of Newfoundland English defines as "uninhabited treeless stretches of wasteland, supporting low shrubs, berries, mosses, and wild animals" (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson 1990: 26-27). Local people have historically ventured into the inland barrens to hunt, pick berries, and gather wood.

The more densely populated area will simply be referred to by the term 'the regional centre.' The nearest metropolis will be referred to by its actual name: 'St. John's,' though its geographical relationship to the Barren Shore will be left relatively ambiguous. I will simply say that it is within a three and a half hour drive of the Shore. While I recognize that my decision to

¹²Most demographic information referred to in the thesis is drawn from the 1996 and/or the 1991 editions of the census.

use census data from the region may limit the extent to which the true identity of the research site can be concealed, I feel that stating it overtly would make it much more difficult to protect the anonymity of those persons who agreed to participate in the research.

1.1.2.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BARREN SHORE

The bays of the eastern Newfoundland have long been renowned for their bountiful cod fisheries. Waters off the Barren Shore are no exception. The local fishery has been so productive that settlement persisted in the area for over three hundred years, despite a harsh climate and a hostile landscape which offers few economic alternatives. Residents were able to adapt to the demands of the environment through a combination of animal husbandry, small-scale, subsistence hunting and gathering, and the cultivation of root crops. It was the sale of salted codfish to merchants in exchange for supplies and essential food items, however, that has traditionally made up the most important facet of the economy. Though the merchant capital (or 'truck') system rarely paid fishers¹³ for the full value of their catch, and left most continually impoverished, the economic credit extended by merchants enabled most people to survive the resource fluctuations and sporadic shortages that have long characterized life in Newfoundland fishing settlements (Cadigan 1995; Student Essays¹⁴).

This historic fishery consisted primarily of small-boats, and fixed-gear harvesting

¹³The term fishers is used throughout the text to designate people who actually harvest fish for a living, as opposed to those who work in fish processing plants.

¹⁴I have made extensive use of several undergraduate essays catalogued in Memorial University's Maritime History Archive. Because the titles of these essays make reference to specific community names, however, I am unable to reference them properly. Instead, information obtained from these sources will be referred to by the term 'Student Essays.' More discussion of this decision can be found in the methodology section.

techniques.¹⁵ Cod fish was caught, cleaned, salted and dried by people in the communities themselves, before being sold to merchants as a finished product.¹⁶ The poverty brought by economic depression in the 1930s, and the subsequent wage labour opportunities offered by American military bases in the 1940s drew many out of the region to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Most of the residents that stayed behind continued to rely on the inshore fishery, long after Newfoundland entered Confederation with Canada in 1949 (Student Essays).

Federal policies in the decades following Confederation sought to intensify the Newfoundland cod fishery by modernizing and professionalizing the industry. For the most part, this meant taking steps toward reducing the numbers of people employed in the sector by phasing out the time-honoured inshore fishery in favour of large scale industrial offshore trawlers (Sinclair 1985). One way in which this shift was encouraged was through the introduction of federally and provincially funded social programs. The availability of unemployment insurance, in particular, created a strong incentive toward wage labour and participation in the cash economy. These funds promised to sustain fishery workers through the winter, thereby allowing them to lengthen their fishing season, and increase their yield, instead of concentrating on other subsistence activities (Sinclair 1985).

Despite these efforts, many people on the Barren Shore continued to depend heavily on the inshore fishery. Though small numbers of people were able to secure births on offshore draggers, which operated out the regional centre and other ports within commuting distance of the Shore,

¹⁵This consisted primarily of nets, traps, and handlines, as opposed to the mobile-gear techniques employed by draggers and trawlers in later years.

¹⁶More extensive descriptions of the historic Newfoundland inshore cod fisheries are offered by Wadel (1973); Stavely (1982); Sinclair (1985); and Sider (1985).

most fishers in the area continued to use fixed-gear techniques to exploit the cod stocks during their summer inshore migration (Student Essays). The more significant economic impact of the development of the offshore sector for people on the Shore came through the construction of new fish processing plants. The advent of freezer technologies had led to an increasing demand for fresh fish, rather than the traditional salted fish. This led to a flurry of fish plant construction in the 1960s and 70s. Processing plants served to revolutionize the economy of the Barren Shore. By the early seventies, several plants had been built within commuting distance, and processing companies quickly became the major employer of people living in the region (Ibid.).

In the late seventies, processing plants assumed an even greater role in the lives of Barren Shore residents. In 1977, Canada followed Iceland in extending its exclusive fishing rights to include all waters within two hundred miles of its coast line.¹⁷ This newly claimed territory prompted the Department of Fisheries and Oceans to intensify production. Despite union protests, the offshore dragger fishery was expanded considerably in the late 70s and early 80s (Felt and Locke 1995: 209). With the enlargement of the offshore sector, cod harvests soared, leading to the construction of more processing plants, and an increased demand for labour. This period also marked the first attempts to commercially harvest other species, such as caplin and squid. By the end of the decade, there were at least seven plants within commuting distance of the Barren Shore. The labour required was so great that many women and teenage children started to seek work in the plant. This created a period of economic boom, as record numbers of people were able to

¹⁷The previous boundary line had been only three miles from shore.

qualify for unemployment insurance.¹⁸ The prosperity of the period was aided by the efforts of many fish plant owners and managers to provide as many people as possible with EI¹⁹ benefits by employing large numbers of people for short periods of time, rather than fewer people for longer periods (Student Essays).

This modernizing trend in the fishery was paralleled in a variety of other industries on the island. The federal government, in conjunction with the provincial regime of Joey Smallwood, sought to increase the number of wage labour opportunities available to outport people, and thereby move them away from the seasonal subsistence cycle. The success of this effort was subject to significant regional variations. The Barren Shore experienced particular difficulties, because it did not have a sufficient resource base to warrant a commercial lumbering or mining industry. Some men were able to secure wage labour positions in the iron ore mines of Bell Island during the 1950s and early sixties. These positions were eventually terminated in 1966, however, when the mines were shut down. Others found work in the commercial sealing industry. The limited opportunities outside of the fishery prompted many people, primarily men, to travel to other parts of the island, Labrador, or to centres in mainland Canada or the US, in search of more stable seasonal, or permanent employment (Mathews 1983; Student Essays).

Perhaps the only economic advantage that residents of the Barren Shore held over their counterparts in other parts of Newfoundland is their proximity to larger centres. As was

¹⁸These positions tended to be fairly low paying, however, prompting some people to seek work elsewhere.

¹⁹Although 'employment insurance' or 'EI' was previously referred to as 'unemployment insurance' or 'UI,' I have elected to use the abbreviation 'EI' throughout the text, for consistency's sake.

previously noted, the Shore is within a three and a half hour drive of St. John's, the island's only major city. St. John's was much less accessible prior to the paving of the main road in the late 1970s, but has subsequently emerged an important part of the Shore's economy. Since the road was paved, some residents have taken to commuting to St. John's to work, and returning home on weekends, or for the winter, to draw unemployment insurance. The regional centre also provides some wage labour positions to Shore residents. The economic opportunities in this centre are very limited, however, and it has a high unemployment rate of its own. Nonetheless, some people from the Shore have been able to take advantage of openings in the developing service industry, or in hospitals, schools, or small businesses.

Some people have also been able to exploit work opportunities on and around the Shore itself. Cato Wadel (1973) pointed out that confederation created a class of professional migratory construction workers in many outport regions. This is true of the Barren Shore as well. Despite the emphasis on self-sufficiency in many outport households, a small number of people have been able to survive through work on construction projects, or through a variety of other trades such as carpentry, roofing, plumbing, and auto-mechanics. Furthermore, some people have managed to find work in the myriad of small grocery and convenience stores in the region, or in other specialty stores, such as craft shops, hair-cutting salons, hardware stores, and clubs (Student Essays).

In 1991, the last census year before the cod moratorium of 1992, out of 1135 employed people living on the Shore: 190 people (16.7% of the jobs held by people in the region) were employed in the primary sector.²⁰, 370 people (32.6%) were employed in the manufacturing

²⁰Since there are no mining or forestry operations within easy access of the region, it would be expected that the vast majority of these persons would have been employed as fishers, though there may have been a small number who found seasonal work in primary industry on the

sector²¹, 145 people (12.8%) were employed in the wholesale or retail sector, 140 people (12.3%) were employed in businesses or service industries, 115 people (10.1%) were employed in construction, 80 people (7.0%) were employed in the healthcare system or in other government service industries, 60 people (5.3%) were employed in the educational service industry, and 35 people (3.1%) were employed by communications and utilities industries (Statistics Canada 1994).²²

Those that were not able to find enough work to qualify for unemployment insurance were forced to rely on the help of friends and family members, and in many cases, on social assistance payments as well. Wadel (1973) has shown how the industrialization and economic specialization that followed Confederation created a lack of economic opportunities in some outport regions and led to the creation of a class of chronically unemployed people. This effect was quite apparent on the Barren Shore. Between 1986 and 1996, the unemployment rate for persons over the age of twenty-five living on the Shore hovered between forty-three percent and fifty-six percent²³ (Statistics Canada 1987; 1994; 1999).

1.1.2.2 TRANSFER PAYMENTS, MODERNIZATION AND CULTURAL INFLEXIBILITY

Several recent studies have stressed the importance of the industrial revolution in bringing

mainland, or in another parts of Newfoundland.

²¹While some may have found work in a factory in St. John's or in the one moderately large factory in the regional centre, most of these persons probably worked in one of the many fish processing plants within commuting distance of the Shore.

²²Despite the economic promise of the Newfoundland offshore oil industry, very few Barren Shore residents have obtained lasting employment in this sector.

²³In 1996, the unemployment rate was at forty-six percent (Statistics Canada 1999).

about a state of global risk (Giddens 1991; Beck 1992; Rappaport 1993; Dyer 1997). These arguments tend to be rooted in the idea that 'pre-industrial' societies are better adapted to their physical surroundings than are 'industrialized' ones. As a result, they are better equipped to cope with environmental changes and resource shortages as they occur and are, therefore, less prone to disaster.

This point is well illustrated by the predicament faced by many Newfoundland outports. Volatile fluctuations in the fishery led to the development of an economic system that was capable of dealing with scarcity. The flexibility of the yearly cycle allowed outport residents to adapt gradually to shortages in the fishery by intensifying gardening, hunting, and other subsistence practices. Most of these practices have been abandoned in the last fifty years, however, in favour of wage labour and more modern methods of production.

The introduction of government transfer payments and industrial technologies has created a relationship of economic dependency, as people have gradually moved away from historically entrenched subsistence activities. The merchant capitalist economy, however exploitative, allowed workers to exercise a high measure of control over the production process. The industrialization of the industry that has occurred in the post-Confederation era, on the other hand, has left many workers dependent on exogenous technologies and foreign capital for their survival. This transformation seems to have had a rigidifying effect on many communities, as they have grown increasingly reliant on a single industry, the fishery. I would estimate from the census data that in 1991, almost half (49%) of the employed people living in the region were working in fishery-related industries. Even those persons that were not directly employed in the industry tended to depend heavily on the spending of fishery workers for a significant portion of their incomes. While

the role that the embracing of industrial modes of production and the subsequent expansion of the fishing industry played in bringing about the eventual collapse of the cod stocks is a matter of some debate, it is clear that these changes served to erode the fishery workers' capacities to adapt when the resource base eventually deteriorated.

1.1.2.3 THE COD MORATORIUM AND THE IMPACT OF THE TAGS PROGRAM

By the beginning of the 1990s, many cod fishery-dependent areas of Newfoundland experienced a marked decline in the size of their harvests. Similar trends were observed in most of Atlantic Canada. When stocks had shown no signs of recovery by 1992, the federal government declared a moratorium on the commercial harvesting of Northern Cod. In making the announcement, then federal fisheries minister John Crosbie declared:

....the number of fishermen and plant workers today is such that even when the resource is fully rebuilt, its harvesting and processing will not generate sufficient revenues to support with adequate incomes all current fishermen and plant workers. Because of this, there will need to be some restructuring of the fishing industry for Northern Cod. (1992: 9).

In an effort to compensate fishery workers for their lost livelihoods, and encourage people to seek work in other industries, the federal government developed the 'Northern Cod Adjustment and Retraining Program,' or 'NCARP.' The program offered regular payments to the displaced workers and, for those that desired it, provided retraining programs for employment in other industries (Woodrow 1996).

When the stocks had shown no signs of recovery by 1994, NCARP was replaced by a five year, 1.9 billion dollar compensation and retraining program called, 'The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy' or 'TAGS.' The program's philosophy can be summarized into six main goals: income support, encouraging early retirements and license buyouts, fostering community economic

development, expanding and diversifying the fishing industry, retraining people for work in other industries, and support for out-migration. The next section explores the way in which each of these goals was played out in practice on the Barren Shore.

a) Income Support

The most immediate goal of the program was to offer financial compensation to displaced fishery workers in Atlantic Canada. TAGS differed from NCARP in that it promised fishery workers regular compensation for as many as five years. The average biweekly payment for fishers in Newfoundland was \$706, while plant workers received an average payment of \$528 (Human Resources Development Canada, Communications Branch 1998: 59).

In August of 1998, as the program neared its end, the average income of fishers on TAGS in Newfoundland was approximately \$28,000. For plant workers, it was around \$18,000 (Ibid. 69). The reason that these figures are considerably higher than the salaries provided by TAGS payments alone is that many recipients were able to supplement their compensation payments with employment income and, in some cases, EI as well. A 1996 study by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador found that only 28 percent of program participants reported no income other than that provided by TAGS, while 72 percent received additional income. More than half of these persons (46% of the total) qualified for EI on top of these earnings (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Finance, Economics and Statistics Branch 1997).

Most experienced fishers living on the Barren Shore qualified for the full five years of compensation, while experienced plant workers were covered for three years. When funding for the program was exhausted in 1998, a year before the initially forecasted date, most of those

persons who still qualified for TAGS payments were compensated by a new \$750 million dollar post-TAGS program. "Post-TAGS Restructuring and Adjustment Initiative," as it is sometimes called, was unveiled on June 19, 1998, and consisted primarily of final lump sum payments for those whose payments had been terminated prematurely.

b) Early Retirements and Licence Buyouts

The second goal was to downsize the cod fishery by creating incentives for those persons in their fifties, sixties, and seventies to accept an early retirement packages, and by offering incentives for those in younger age brackets to sell their groundfish licenses. Though specific data about the numbers of people living on the Barren Shore who decided to exit the groundfish fishery through these means is not available, most people that I spoke to indicated that very few people had opted for these routes. This parallels the situation in many other parts of the province (Human Resources Development Canada, Communications Branch 1998). When the TAGS program expired, the post-TAGS program presented yet another effort to buy back groundfish licenses. The extent to which this program was successful on the Barren Shore is beyond the grasp of this research.

c) Community Economic Development (CED)

Most efforts at community economic development consisted of funding for the development of new businesses and the creation of short-term employment projects. For the most part, people on the Shore indicated that most of the efforts to fund new businesses had been abysmal failures. Of the ten or more people that I spoke to, none could name a business that had been started with TAGS money that was still operating in 1998.

When I inquired about why they thought this was the case, two explanations were

commonly evoked. The first was that there were very few genuinely feasible ideas that could be pursued in the area. Most thought that the majority of the business services that were needed in the area had already been exploited. Some said that even the previously unexploited commercial strengths of the area, such as the large supply of kelp, and of other fish species would be of little value to entrepreneurs, because the demand was already satisfied by businesses in other parts of Newfoundland and elsewhere.

Several people complained that the size of the grants given for business development were not sufficient to fund the sorts of large-scale ventures that might succeed in the area. A few said that the only way to make it work would have been to offer grants to entire communities, rather than to isolated individuals. Similar findings were offered by another study, which found that most TAGS recipients believed that “a more community-based approach” to economic development was needed (Ibid. 10).

Somewhat more successful were the employment programs that were set up to help people to qualify for EI. These programs tended to focus such things as: encouraging the development of the tourist industry through community beautification projects, improving the quality of local roads, maintaining wharves, brush clearing, cleaning up of local dumps, and other community-based initiatives. Participation in these programs helped many Barren Shore residents qualify for EI. Most were short-term programs, however, and there is little reason to believe that people will continue to be employed to perform these tasks in the long run.

d) The Expansion and Diversification of the Fishing Industry

The fourth goal of the program was to expand the fishery into new areas. This involved issuing new licenses and new quotas for previously unexploited, or 'under-utilized' species. This dimension of the program has proven to be quite successful in many parts of the province, at least in the short run, as many fishers and plant workers have been able to find work in the harvesting and processing of snow crab, shrimp, caplin, lumpfish, squid, and other species. While the Shore features limited inshore shrimp resources, many local people fared well in fishing for lumpfish, caplin and particularly snow crab. Although snow crab has not provided the economic foundation that the cod fishery provided for Barren Shore residents, it has helped many TAGS recipients to earn additional income, and has employed some younger people who were not compensated by TAGS. Many of those persons who owned their own boats did extremely well, by combining TAGS income with income earned through the crab fishery, and often EI as well. The crab fishery has given less of a boost to plant workers, however, because it is not as labourious a species to process as cod had been.

e) Support for Out-Migration

The fifth goal was to reduce the numbers of people employed in the cod fishery by providing incentives for people to leave outports in search of employment elsewhere. Usually, this meant moving to other parts of Canada. The TAGS program helped to shelter the cost of moving, by paying for travel costs, and continuing to provide payments for the duration of the person's qualification period, regardless of whether or not they were able to secure a new job.

It appears that the TAGS program was successful in prompting some people to leave the Barren Shore. Between 1991 and 1996, the population of the Shore fell by 160 people, a decline

of nearly six percent. While it is difficult to determine how many of these people were TAGS recipients, or family members of TAGS recipients, it would be expected that many of those who left had at least some tie to the fishery, whether or not they qualified for the program. Many of those that left sought work in the booming oil industry in northern Alberta, or in urban centres such as Toronto or Calgary.

Despite this considerable adjustment, the numbers of people moving away from the Barren Shore, and many other fishery dependent regions of the province, was considerably fewer than had been anticipated by the designers of the program (Sinclair et al.; Woodrow 1996; Andy Rowe and Associates 1998). In explaining the reluctance on the part of many people to leave in an unnamed community in eastern Newfoundland, which bears a strong resemblance to those on the Barren Shore, one study concluded:

While many families have been hard hit by the groundfish shutdown, others have been cushioned by the pattern of seasonal work and multiple earners. There is little sense of urgency about adjusting, as the fishery is still active. TAGS clients are unwilling to give up the fishery as long as it provides some work, and are therefore concerned about losing their seniority in the plant or their fishing licenses. (Andy Rowe and Associates 1998: 10).

In addition to these forces, a variety of other factors help to explain the reluctance of TAGS recipients to move away from the Shore.

Several studies that have been done since the TAGS program commenced have found that one of the most consistent predictors of migration is age (Sinclair et al.; Woodrow 1996; Human Resources Development Canada, Communications Branch 1998). The older people are, the less likely they are to move. This is not surprising, because the TAGS program tended to afford older workers much longer economic cushions. This allowed them to put off their decision about whether to move significantly longer than those who were cut off of the program more quickly

(Human Resources Development Canada, Communications Branch 1998).

Many of the older recipients also tended to be more prone to many other barriers to mobility, including: a limited formal education and few transferable job skills, owning a home in the region, being married to someone in the region, especially if one's spouse is employed, and having strong emotional ties to the people and the landscape of their home communities (Sinclair et al.; Human Resources Development Canada, Communications Branch 1998).

Table 1.2 Population Change on the Barren Shore Between 1991 and 1996 by Age *

Age Cohort Number	Age Group Belonged to in 1991 and 1996	Population in 1991	Population in 1996	Population Change
1	not born, 0-4	N/A	110	N/A
2	0-4, 5-9	145	140	-5 (-3.4%)
3	5-9, 10-14	250	245	-5 (-3.4%)
4	10-14, 15-19	215	215	no change
5	15-19, 20-24	210	170	-40 (-19.0)
6	20-24, 25-29	170	125	-45 (-26.5%)
7	25-29, 30-34	215	190	-25 (-11.6%)
8	30-34, 35-39	220	235	+15 (+6.8%)
9	35-39, 40-44	220	205	-15 (-6.8%)
10	40-44, 45-49	180	185	+5 (+2.8%)
11	45-49, 50-54	160	160	no change
12	50-54, 55-59	125	125	no change
13	55-59, 60-64	135	130	-5 (-3.7%)
14	60-64, 65-69	140	135	-5 (-3.7%)
15	65-74, 70-79	300	235	-65 (-21.7%)
16	75+, 80+	190	110	-80 (-42.1%)
	TOTAL	2875	2715	-160 (-5.6%)

*Data obtained from Statistics Canada (1992; 1994; 1999).

The data in Table 1.2 indicates that the decline in the Barren Shore's population between 1991 and 1996 was mainly due to the large decline in the numbers of people in age cohorts: 5, 6, 7, 15 and 16. Those in age cohorts 5, 6 and 7 were all to be between the ages of twenty and thirty-five in 1996. In total, the number of people in these groups fell by 110 in five years. This decline is probably explainable by the moratorium. People in these younger age cohorts were less

likely to have received long term compensation, and were presumably more employable and more mobile than those in older age groups.

The other major decline was in age cohorts 15 and 16. Persons in these cohorts were to be over the age of sixty in 1996. These groups lost 155 people over the five year span. This dramatic decline may be explainable in part by death, and in part by the construction of a large retirement home just outside of the census district.

Interestingly, the population in age cohorts 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 remained virtually unchanged. In fact, it increased by five people. People in these groups were expected to be between thirty-five and fifty nine in 1996. The fact that so few opted to leave suggests that they were reluctant to give up their lives on the Shore, and were instead hoping for a revival of the local economy. Also, most longer-term TAGS recipients on the Shore belonged in this category. The age distribution of all people qualifying for TAGS in Newfoundland and Labrador was as follows: 23.6% were between 25 and 34; 36.3% were between 35 and 44; 27.4% were between 45 and 54; and 11.8% were over the age of 55 (Human Resources Development Canada 1998). Many persons in older age brackets were still receiving compensation in 1996 and could afford to wait out the moratorium period without experiencing extreme financial hardship.

f) Retraining

Because so few fishery workers had decided to retrain under the optional programs offered by the NCARP program, TAGS made retraining programs compulsory for all those wishing to receive financial compensation. High schools, town halls, and other public centres across the island were all converted into classrooms, to make retraining as easy as possible for outport residents. The program also endeavoured to subsidize any persons wishing to take a retraining

course that was only offered in another part of the province.

Though some research has suggested that many outport communities were very receptive to retraining (Human Resources Development Canada, Communications Division 1998), the situation on the Barren Shore did not appear to be as positive. Many participants simply chose to take the option of training for work in the fishery, while others opted to try to complete their high school diplomas through the Adult Basic Education option. Several others took a course in entrepreneurship, though most of those that I spoke to pronounced the course to be a waste of time. A number of area residents told me that many people didn't go to retraining course at all. Because attendance at courses was not carefully policed, many people attended the first few classes and then stopped going altogether.

Most of those that did retrain opted for training in skills that they were already familiar with, such as carpentry and small engine repair for men, and hair cutting and sewing for women. This created a problem as well, however, because so few of these persons were willing to move away. As a result, the Barren Shore housed a great many people who retrained into industries in which they had no hope of finding local employment. None of the interviewees could identify anyone living on the Shore who had managed to secure lasting employment in the field they had retrained for.

1.1.2.4 SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES RESULTING FROM TAGS

For those TAGS recipients that did not move away or find lasting work in other industries, the moratorium produced a state of ambivalence. With the exception of the few who found full seasons of work through the crab or lumpfish fisheries, most people found themselves without work for long periods of time. For some, this period of unemployment lasted as many as six and a

half years, from the commencement of the moratorium in June of 1992, to the end of the post-TAGS program early in 1999.

Most people found that long periods without employment produced several tensions in their lives. Many of these tensions bore strong resonance with those outlined by Cato Wadel in his now classic 1973 study Now Whose Fault: The Struggle for Self-Esteem in the Face of Chronic Unemployment. Wadel pointed out that in addition to the economic deprivations commonly experienced by unemployed people in Newfoundland outports, long term unemployment can also lead to difficulties in: maintaining friendships with others, maintaining one's sense of identity, maintaining one's feelings of self-esteem, and maintaining one's credibility in the eyes of others in the community. In an effort to compensate for these deficits, many TAGS recipients sought out new activities to become involved with. One of the most common reactions was to make frequent visits to the local club, where they could freely interact with other people in similarly ambivalent situations.

Regular outings to the clubs were affordable, because most TAGS recipients did not suffer marked declines in their incomes. Many of those that were able to supplement their TAGS income with some other work made even more money than they did when they were working. Thus, one of the most significant consequences of the program was that it created a class of unemployed or seasonally unemployed people who were fairly affluent by community standards. Because the area had been almost exclusively dependent on the fishery, many residents received payments for either four or five out of the possible five years. Another major difference between the work and EI system and the TAGS program was that TAGS payments remained constant throughout the winter. This had never been the case in years past, when the winter months usually brought

considerable reductions in income, forcing most households to be more frugal. As a result, the TAGS system allowed many people a measure of economic security that had never been present before.

The TAGS program also had a dramatic consequences for the lives of many persons who did not receive compensation. The infusion of federal money into the region served to bring about significant changes to both the occupational and the income structure of Barren Shore communities. This in turn produced a variety of secondary economic and social effects.

1.1.2.4.1 CHANGES TO THE EMPLOYMENT STRUCTURE

Between 1991 (the year prior to the commencement of the moratorium) and 1996 (the midway point of the TAGS program), the number of employed people living in the Barren Shore census district fell by 350 (30.2%). The loss of jobs in each sector is illustrated in Table 1.3. Not surprisingly, 285 (81.4%) of the jobs were lost in the primary and manufacturing sectors. It would be expected that the vast majority of 115 positions lost in the primary sector were employed as fishers. This represented a loss of 60.5%. Similarly, it is likely that most, if not all, of the 170 fewer positions in the manufacturing sector (down 45.9%) resulted from the downsizing or closing of the fish processing plants in the vicinity of the Shore (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999).

It is estimated that between sixteen and twenty-one percent of the population over the age of fifteen living in the district qualified for compensation when the TAGS program was unveiled in 1994 (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Finance, Economics and Statistics Branch 1997). Assuming no change from the percentage of the population employed in the industry in 1991, that represents between forty and fifty percent of all fishery workers living in the region. Most of the remaining fifty to sixty percent that did not qualify for the program were

forced to either look for work in other sectors, move away to find work in another region, or go on social assistance. It would be expected that most of those who did not qualify for compensation were younger and presumably more mobile than those who did. Thus, it is likely that most of those that did not qualify had an easier time finding work in other sectors than those that were cut off of the program at a later point.

Table 1.3 Changes to the Employment Distribution of the Barren Shore (By the Number of People Employed in Each Sector) Between 1991 and 1996*

Economic Sector	Number of People Employed in the Sector in 1991	Number of People Employed in the Sector in 1996	Change Between 1991 and 1996
Primary (fishing)	190	75	-115 (-60.5%)
Manufacturing (processing plants)	370	200	-170 (-45.9%)
Construction	115	90	-25 (-21.7%)
Retail/Wholesale	145	135	-10 (-7.0%)
Businesses and Other Service Industries	140	105	-35 (-25.0%)
Communications and Utilities	35	25	-10 (-28.6%)
Education	60	65	+5 (+8.3%)
Healthcare and Other Government Services	80	90	+10 (+12.5%)
TOTAL	1135	785	-350 (-30.2%)

*Data obtained from Statistics Canada (1992; 1994; 1999).

What is more surprising about this period is that an additional 65 jobs were lost in other industries. This included declines in businesses or other service industries, which lost 35 positions (down 25.0%), construction, which lost 25 positions (down 21.7%), communications and utilities, which lost 10 positions (down 28.6%), and retail and wholesale, which also lost 10 positions

(down 7.0%). The only sectors to show a gain were the health and social services industry, which gained 10 positions (up 12.5%) and the educational services industry, which gained 5 positions (up 8.3%)²⁴ (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999).

My conversations with people who had lived through the moratorium informed me that many of the jobs lost in construction, businesses, and in service related industries occurred because this group suddenly faced competition from TAGS recipients. Many of the men who had been employed in the fishery had also acquired skills in carpentry, plumbing, roofing, or other trades. This number rose even higher thanks to retraining programs that were offered in many of these fields. Because these persons were receiving NCARP, and later TAGS, income, they could afford to do this work at a much lower cost than those who had been doing it previously. This allowed them to charge considerably less for their services. As a result, many people who had been able to earn a living in these fields prior to the moratorium found themselves unable to compete, and were forced to either look for other sources of employment, or settle for much lower incomes. This undercutting of existing operations was particularly apparent in businesses with low start-up costs.

One man recounted the story of the demise of the driveway sealing company that he had started with one of his friends in 1991. For two years, their business did very well, as they were one of only four such enterprises in the province. At the time, they were offering a very competitive rate, at ten cents per square foot. Within a year of the unveiling of the NCARP program, there were more than thirty driveway sealing businesses in the province. Due to the

²⁴ It is quite probable that the numbers of people employed in each of these sectors has fallen considerably in the years following the 1996 census. Considerable funding cuts have been made to the provincial healthcare system and a large restructuring of the education system has dramatically reduced the number of teaching positions in the province.

income cushion provided by TAGS, many of the new businesses were able to charge as low as six or seven cents per square foot. This made it simply impossible for the two men to compete for contracts, and their business quickly went bankrupt.

Declines in other sectors such as service industries, wholesale and retail, and communications and utilities may be attributable to the reduced spending power that many newly unemployed people experienced. Those in the wholesale and retail sector did not experience as large of a workforce decline. This is because most people in this sector were employed in the regional centre by large grocery or department stores. These corporations did not suffer as badly as the businesses in the fishing villages themselves. They had the advantage of being able to draw upon the more diversified economy of the regional centre, and enjoyed monopolies or virtual monopolies on the sale of many essential items.

Many of those businesses in the fishing communities themselves that were able to stay afloat did so because they occupied a niche that was difficult for others to fill. For example, owners of hardware stores, clubs, and grocery stores were well established in the region, and few went bankrupt during the moratorium. This is probably due to the fact that it would have been very difficult for TAGS recipients to move into these industries. All required a large investment of capital to get into, and most TAGS recipients lacked the desirable real estate, business experience, and connections to suppliers that the existing businesses had. Furthermore, many of the existing operations had built up a strong base of support among their clientele which would have been difficult to erode.

Finally, as mentioned, those in the professional class, such as teachers, doctors, and nurses, did not experience a loss of employment. For the most part, these persons were uniquely qualified

to work in their fields, because they had fulfilled the specialized education requirements for the positions. Moreover, their salaries were not contingent on the spending power of area residents, but rather on government funding.

Ironically, even though the region lost 350 jobs in this period, the unemployment rate actually fell between 1991 and 1996 from 48.7% to 46.0%.²⁵ The reason for the decline is that the number of people in the workforce fell during that period by 290, from 1160 to 870. The overall participation rate fell from 51.6% to 39.1%, a fall of 12.5%²⁶ (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999).

The reason for the dramatic decline in the number of people who were actively engaged in a search for work is beyond the grasp of this study. Factors which may be partly responsible include: the out-migration of a large proportion of the eligible workforce; the high number of retirements brought about by the early retirement option of the TAGS program; and the decision of some fishery workers to wait out the moratorium in the hopes of remaining in the fishery, rather than searching for a new line of work.

By 1996, the employment distribution had changed dramatically from the 1991 figures. When the various economic sectors on the Barren Shore are compared only in terms of the relative percentage of the workforce that they employ, it is apparent that the primary and manufacturing sectors suffered dramatic declines in their relative importance to the overall workforce. Table 1.4 shows that the proportion of the workforce employed in the primary sector fell by 42.5%, while

²⁵For men, the unemployment rate dropped from 48.4% to 41.9%, while for women, it rose slightly, from 49.0% to 50.6%.

²⁶For men, the participant rate fell from 55.7% to 41.3% and for women, it fell from 47.3% to 36.7% (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999).

the proportion employed in the manufacturing sector fell by 21.7%. By contrast, all other sectors showed at least some increase in their relative importance (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999).

Table 1.4 Changes to the Employment Distribution of the Barren Shore (By the Percentage of The Workforce Employed in Each Sector) Between 1991 and 1996*

Economic Sector	Percentage of Workforce Employed in the Sector in 1991	Percentage of Workforce Employed in the Sector in 1996	% Change Between 1991 and 1996
Primary (fishing)	16.7%	9.6%	-42.5%
Manufacturing (processing plants)	32.6%	25.5%	-21.7%
Construction	10.1%	11.4%	12.9
Retail/Wholesale	12.8%	17.2%	+34.4%
Businesses and Other Service Industries	12.3%	13.4%	+8.9%
Communications and Utilities	3.1%	3.2%	+3.2%
Education	5.3%	8.3%	+56.6%
Healthcare and Other Government Services	7.0%	11.5%	+64.3%

*Data obtained from Statistics Canada (1992; 1994; 1999).

1.1.2.4.2 CHANGES TO THE INCOME STRUCTURE

Similar upheaval was apparent in the changes to the income distribution of the region during this period. Table 1.5 shows that the number of economic families with incomes lower than \$10,000 rose from 15 to 80, an increase of 433 percent (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999). This dramatic rise may be attributable to the high number of displaced fishers and plant workers, who were not receiving TAGS, and had not been able to find replacement work. Others may have been employed in some other sector in 1991, but had subsequently lost their job during the early

years of the moratorium. Finally, there were those families that had relied on social assistance payments prior to the moratorium, and continued to do so afterward.

The number of families making between \$10,000 and \$19,999, by contrast fell quite steeply from 280 to 120, a change of about 57 percent (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999). Those families who ceased to be in this category might include those mentioned in the previous paragraph, who had been put out of work during the moratorium. It may also include the families of fishery workers who were now receiving TAGS income. Many of these persons were making more money than before, thanks to the income support and new opportunities made available through the program, and the booming crab fishery.

The number of families making between \$20,000 and \$29,999 rose by 63 percent, from 160 to 260 (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999). Those new to this category may include the families of TAGS recipients, some of whom had been able to supplement their TAGS payments with employment income and, in some cases, EI if they were able to secure enough work through the crab fishery or other means. Some may also be multiple income families, or families with more than one TAGS recipient.

Those making between \$30,000 and \$60,000 rose from 255 to 300, a gain of 18 percent. Most of the increase occurred in the \$40,000 to \$49,999 range, which saw a gain of 35 families (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999). This group may include the families of fishers who benefited from TAGS income as well as a high income from the crab fishery, or the fishing of other alternative species. It may also include some families in which two or more family members qualified for TAGS. Finally, it may consist of some people who have suffered a loss in pay, due to their heavy stake in the cod fishery. This is evident by the fact that the number of people making

\$60,000 or more fell from 70 to 35, a fall of 50 percent (Statistics Canada 1992; 1994; 1999).

Table 1.5 Changes to Family Incomes on the Barren Shore Between 1991 and 1996*

Family Income	Number of Economic Families²⁷ 1991	Number of Economic Families 1996	Change Between 1991 and 1996
less than \$10,000	15	80	+65 (+433.3%)
\$10,000-\$19,999	280	120	-160 (-57.1%)
\$20,000-\$29,999	160	260	+100 (+62.5%)
\$30,000-\$39,999	160	165	+5 (+3.1%)
\$40,000-\$49,999	40	75	+35 (+87.5%)
\$50,000-\$59,999	55	60	+5 (+9.1%)
\$60,000-\$69,999	25	15	-10 (-40%)
\$70,000 and higher	45	20	-25 (-55.6%)
TOTAL	780	795	+15 (+1.9%)
Average Income	\$30,473	\$29,670	-\$803(-2.6%)
Median Income	\$25,588	\$26,165	+\$577 (+2.3%)

* Data obtained from Statistics Canada (1992; 1994; 1999).

It appears that a major effect of the moratorium, and the consequent compensation programs was to divide lower working class families, into those making incomes higher than they had made prior to the onset of the program, and those making significantly less money than they had prior to the program. A second effect of the moratorium is that it has reduced the number of families that were relatively wealthy by community standards (those making more than \$60,000). Instead, there has been a notable increase in the high-middle income bracket of forty to fifty

²⁷The Canadian census defines an economic family is a group of individuals sharing a common dwelling unit who are related by blood, marriage (including common-law relationships) or adoption (Statistics Canada 1999).

thousand.

1.2 THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF VLT GAMBLING IN POST-MORATORIUM NEWFOUNDLAND

Whether the proliferation of VLTs into outport communities during the moratorium era was deliberate or coincidental is not clear. It is quite evident, however, that the moratorium, and the myriad of social changes that accompanied it, served to colour the manner in which the machines were received. All of the clubs in the region experienced a dramatic increase in profits during the early nineties, as they were able to capitalize on the boredom brought by widespread unemployment, and the surplus income provided by compensation packages. As VLTs became more widely available in clubs, they began to enjoy an extraordinary general popularity as a wide range of people experimented with the new machines. Most of these people did not come to the club solely to play them, however. The majority came to drink, dance, and socialize, and regarded the machines as merely an additional source of entertainment.

For one set of people, VLTs came to take on a much greater significance. A group of about forty regular players had taken to playing the machines much more regularly, and with much larger expenditures than the others. Though not all were close friends, the majority had come to refer to this group of players by a common term: "The Gamblers."²⁸ This word was defined in opposition to other players who did not gamble with the same dedication and, therefore, were not regarded as members of the group.²⁹ It was not uncommon to hear comments such as: "...oh yes,

²⁸Throughout the thesis, the term 'Gamblers' will be capitalized only when it refers to the group of heavy players.

²⁹It would not be fair to say that all of the heavy players profiled were involved in the group of Gamblers to the same extent. Some seemed to be much more attracted by the comradery of the group than were others. The decision to refer to all of the heaviest players by

she plays, but she's not a Gambler." One self-proclaimed Gambler explained:

There are some players that are sporadic but consistent. The ones who might play one night a week or something. They're different. They just see it as their night out. Some of them will play when they're at a dance on a Saturday night or whatever. Others may stroll over there when they've got a little extra time. We (the Gamblers) are always there. We make the time. Half the time, we don't even notice players like that, even though it's probably a good fifty percent of the people that play the machines that are doing that. They make up as big a percentage as we do, but we don't notice it, because we're there all the time and they aren't. It's always somebody different.

Most players estimated that, on average, when all five machines were in use, there would be between three and four regular Gamblers playing, and between one and two occasional players.

The Gamblers had come to share a set of rituals and beliefs surrounding the appropriate ways of playing the machines and relating to other players. The extent to which players understood and respected these rituals was used as a way of determining who did and did not belong, thereby enforcing the group's boundaries.

The most important defining characteristic of the group concerned the degree of personal and financial commitment that its members were willing to make to gambling. All of the heavy gamblers interviewed averaged at least seven hours of play per week, though some played considerably more. A few players averaged as many as thirty or forty hours per week. With one exception, all of these players said that they spent the majority of their 'extra' money on the machines. Several said that they often played with money that they didn't have to spare.

The sample of Gamblers profiled in this study consisted of twenty five persons. Though players were selected for inclusion in this sample solely on the basis of their frequency of play and

the blanket term "Gamblers" is a stylistic device intended to elucidate the social importance of the VLT playing community in the lives of most of the heavy players.

the size of their expenditures, many shared a number of other common characteristics as well. In an effort to shed some light on these similarities, the next section presents a demographic profile of the group of Gamblers.

1.2.1 A DEMOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT OF HEAVY VLT GAMBLERS ON THE BARREN SHORE

a) Age/Generation

Though the Gamblers interviewed ranged in age from 25 to 77, most clustered closely around the average age of thirty-five. Eighteen of the twenty-five Gamblers (72%) were between the ages of thirty and fifty, and eight of these (32%) were between thirty-five and thirty-nine. By contrast, only four (16%) were in their twenties, and three (12%) were over the age of 50.

Because of this similarity in age, many Gamblers had a number of generational commonalties as well. Several had known each other long before the first VLTs arrived in the area. Some had gone to grade school together. Others had been co-workers, whether through fishing, work in fish plants, or other occupations.

Even those that hadn't known each other prior to their involvement in the VLT playing community shared a variety of similar experiences by virtue of their common age group. For example, fifteen of the twenty-five Gamblers (60%) had dependent children living at home. Twelve (48%) were married, or living in a common law relationship with someone. Seven (28%) were single parents. Five (20%) had lost a spouse to divorce, and three (12%) had lost a spouse to death. Only five (20%) had never been married.

b) Occupational Status

The fishery had been an extremely important source of employment for members in the

group of Gamblers. Nineteen (76%) had been employed on a fishing boat or at a fish-processing plant at some point in their lives. Fourteen (56%) were working in the fishery when the moratorium was declared in 1992, and eight (32%) had qualified for the TAGS program in 1994. When my research began in June of 1998, three (12%) were still receiving TAGS payments, and, later, all three qualified for further compensation under the post-TAGS program. Four others (16%) had their TAGS payments terminated in 1997.³⁰

At the onset of the research period, nine people (36%) claimed to be receiving some kind of employment income through the fishery.³¹ Three of these fishery workers were employed fishing for crab and other species on inshore vessels, and the other six worked in crab or fish processing plants. Most were employed sporadically during the summer, and subsisted primarily on EI or TAGS payments for the balance of the year. In 1998, all of these persons had been without full-time work for at least six of the previous twelve months.

The experience of having long periods of time without employment characterized the occupational situations of most of the Gamblers, whether they were employed in the fishery or not. The three eldest Gamblers (12%) were all retired. Five Gamblers (20%) were unemployed, and were receiving social assistance payments. All of these persons were more affluent than most social assistance recipients, however. Four had lost their jobs during the past two years. Of these, three had accumulated significant reserves of cash prior to their dismissal, helping them to

³⁰ In addition, two players (8%) had spouses who were receiving TAGS income.

³¹ Interestingly, only five of them (20%) had been TAGS recipients.

supplement their social assistance incomes.³² The other received a considerable income for doing various jobs “*under the table*.” Only one person was a long term social assistance recipient. Her income was also higher than those of most social assistance recipients, however, because she was the primary caregiver for her aged mother and, in return, she received a significant portion of her mother’s pension. Similarly, one other player was a full time student who was receiving considerable financial support from another family member, in addition to her student loans. The remaining five (20%) were employed in other occupations, although most had long periods of time off. One worked in home care, and another in babysitting. This left them with very flexible schedules. Two others were labourers. One worked seasonally on the mainland, while the other worked on the Shore. Neither of these persons were able to secure much work during the winter, however, and both tended to file for EI in these periods instead. Another had recently been cut off of the TAGS program, but had acquired a government clerical position shortly thereafter. The final three worked as bartenders. This gave them easy access to VLTs, even while they were working.

c) Financial Situation

Because of the sensitivity of the issue for many players, I found it difficult to obtain comparative data about the incomes of the Gamblers. I was able to gain insights into this variable through other means, however. Many players volunteered information about themselves, or spoke candidly about other players that they knew about. The relative homogeneity of occupations in the region also helped to provide some idea about the incomes of these players.

³²Prior to that period, one had been a displaced fish plant worker receiving TAGS, two had been teachers, and one had been a nurse’s assistant at a hospital in St. John’s.

It seems evident that while very few of the Gamblers had incomes exceeding \$25,000 per year, or access to large reserves of capital, all had some kind of regular cash flow that enabled them to play heavily. Although a few obtained this money through employment income alone, most were dependent on a combination of income, government transfer payments, and assistance from spouses or other family members. Those that could not reliably secure enough funds to keep pace with the others were not able to gamble as regularly or as heavily, and most found it difficult to maintain close ties to the group.

d) Religious Affiliation

Though comparative data about religious affiliation was also difficult to obtain, it was evident that self-proclaimed Catholics were much more highly represented in the group than were Protestants. In total, only two of the Gamblers (8%) identified themselves as Protestants.³³ Though this figure may be biased, somewhat, by the fact that the clubs in question were located in predominately Catholic communities, the United Church and the Salvation Army Church both had strong footholds in the surrounding areas, and it would have been quite easy for followers of these faiths to access the club. Thus, proximity does not appear to be an adequate explanation.

The reluctance of Protestants to become involved in heavy gambling may be related to the traditional prohibitions on gambling, alcohol consumption and dancing by the Protestant Churches in the area. Clubs emerged in the early 1970s as primarily Catholic institutions, and it is only more recently that Protestants have begun to make inroads. Many of the Gamblers indicated that they did not follow any organized religion, whatsoever. Even these persons tended to have been raised in Catholic families, however.

³³Both attended the Salvation Army church rather than the United Church.

e) Gender

Interestingly, gender was one area in which there did not appear to be a clear pattern in terms of participation. Of the twenty-five Gamblers interviewed, thirteen (52%) were males and twelve (48%) were females. This distribution seemed to be fairly representative of the overall population of regular players. There did appear to be several gender-based behaviour patterns that were common to many of the players, however. For example, men were far more likely to consume alcohol while they gambled. Though a few women would have “*a drink*,” several of the men said that they always associated heavy drinking with playing. None of the women regularly drank heavily while they played. A second difference was that women almost always went to the club in groups, whereas men were more apt to go alone. Thirdly, men tended to be heavier betters than women, though several women regularly bet high as well.

1.3 CHAPTER PREVIEW

The remainder of the thesis is broken down into three broad sections. Chapter two discusses the research methods employed in this project and the experience of conducting fieldwork on the Barren Shore. Chapters three through seven examine the variety of social, psychological, and emotional forces that led the group of Gamblers to become so deeply involved in the playing of VLTs. Chapters eight through eleven examine the incidences of VLT-related problems, and the various individual and governmental efforts to understand and cope with these problems.

Chapter Three investigates the inter-relationship between widespread feelings of boredom and futility and the popularity of clubs and VLTs. While, for many people, these feelings were amplified by the moratorium, they were also reflective of a larger problematic that is decades in the

making. The modernization of many local industries, and the move away from subsistence production has left most Barren Shore residents with an unprecedented amount of free time. Simultaneously, notions about what constitutes an appropriate leisure activity have been transformed, through the introduction of television and other media. Clubs, and later VLTs, have benefited immensely from these changes, because they represent one of the only chances that Barren Shore residents have to experiment with new forms of entertainment.

Chapter Four looks at the identity-providing function of belonging to the group of Gamblers. The free spending and willingness to take risks that characterized the group gave its members a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, something which many had found to be absent from their lives previously. This was particularly valuable to those persons that had been put out of work during the moratorium, and were left to face an uncertain future. Heavy spending may also be viewed as an act of resistance against the exogenous economic and political forces that threatened to restructure their lives.

Chapters Five, Six and Seven explore the meanings that players ascribe to the act of gambling, paying particular attention to the variety of psychological and emotional rewards that people associated with playing VLTs. Chapter Five explores the nature of the feelings of exhilaration and excitement that many players associated with gambling on the machines. Though some said that they only experienced these feelings when they were winning, others said that even anticipating a win was enough to excite them.

Chapter Six deals with the sense of competition that many people derived from playing. Lottery machines provide players with a unique opportunity to compete vigorously against an electronic opponent, plot strategies, court luck, and express joys and frustrations. Many players

felt this dimension of playing helped to compensate for a lack of intellectual stimulation in other aspects of their lives.

Chapter Seven looks at the feelings of relaxation that some gamblers derived from playing. Many people had grown used to using VLTs as a way of distracting them from their anxieties and calming themselves down. Some had become accustomed to using the machines as a way of temporarily withdrawing from a stressful situation, until they were prepared to face it again.

The goal of these five chapters is not to present a universal framework for explaining the appeal of VLT gambling. If anything, this research has made me leery of any efforts to reduce the attractiveness of playing VLTs to any single variable. Rather, I aim to present a range of alternative, but not mutually exclusive, explanations for heavy gambling in the Newfoundland outport context. While only a handful of players voiced all of the motivations presented in these chapters, all shared at least some affinity with one or more of them.

The second section explores the notion of ‘problem gambling’ from a variety of perspectives. Chapter Eight looks at the social, psychological, and environmental factors that contribute to the tendency of many Gamblers to spend more than they initially plan to. Chapter Nine examines the economic and personal problems that were experienced by various Gamblers as a consequence of their overspending. Chapter Ten looks at the efforts made by players to understand and cope with these problems. Lastly, Chapter Eleven reviews the provincial strategy for assisting people who are experiencing gambling related problems, and suggests some ways that this strategy might be modified to better suit the needs of people living in rural communities.

Chapter Two

METHODOLOGY

The term 'methodology' has always struck me as being somewhat misleading when applied to social anthropology. While certain standard tools of the trade, such as field notes, interviews, and participant observation, are shared by the vast majority of researchers, I have come to believe that ethnography is ultimately an individualistic art form. There is no question that a field worker benefits from sound teachings and rigorous discipline, but I have met few practising anthropologists who would dispute the equal, if not even greater, role played by personal style and luck in the production of good ethnographic research.

While I felt very well served by my education at every stage of this project, I must confess that my rigour was somewhat lacking at times. Fortunately, I was compensated, somewhat, for these lapses with a tremendous amount of good fortune. (One might say that an inordinate number of my own gambles proved to be successful.) Countless probable mistakes were successfully circumnavigated thanks to a number of fateful turns, and the good counsel of several kind souls, who helped to guide me beyond my preconceived notions.

The lucky streak actually began before research commenced, while I was struggling to choose a site for the undertaking. Though both of my thesis supervisors had suggested locales within relatively close proximity of St. John's in the early planning stages, I had convinced myself that I needed to venture to the most remote parts of the province in order to fully gauge the effects of VLTs on people living in fishery-dependent communities. I was eventually persuaded to investigate the Barren Shore more closely by the late Jim Hill, the father of my friend and former colleague Vicki Hill. Mr. Hill's encyclopaedic knowledge of the various regions of the province

helped me to recognize that the Barren Shore provided me with a string of relatively isolated fishing villages, which had the advantage of being within commuting distance of St. John's.

This decision proved to be a wise one, before, during, and after my fieldwork period. Prior to the commencement of the research, I was able to make a few advance trips to the region. This enabled me to choose an appropriate community in which to live, and begin looking for accommodations. This made my eventual move much easier, because I had at least some idea of what I was entering into.

During the main research period, I was able to make regular trips into the capital city to conduct library research, consult with my supervisors, obtain materials from the Atlantic Lottery Corporation or Addiction Services headquarters, or just take a break for a few days. I was also treated to a few visits from some of my friends from the city. This, helped me to dispel the lone stranger stigma that plagues so many field workers.

Lastly, I was able to extend my research term from the initially forecasted four months to six and a half months (from June 1 to December 15, 1998), without having to give up my job as a teaching assistant in St. John's. Since moving back into the city, I have managed to return for at least one weekend each month, enabling me to clarify ambiguous points, obtain follow up information and, most importantly, maintain close ties with my friends and loved ones still living on the Barren Shore.

2.1 GETTING STARTED

Fortune continued to smile upon me in the early stages of my fieldwork period. Thanks to the kindness of my friend and department head, Rex Clark, and his wife Heather Wareham, I was able to secure a beautiful, if somewhat rickety, one hundred-year-old ocean front home for a very

affordable price. This favour was greatly appreciated, as there were surprisingly few other rental properties in the area, and none was so perfectly suited to my needs. The house was conveniently situated in the heart of the community, but was out of the view of most houses, at the end of a long laneway. This privacy became very useful to me, because many of the interviewees involved in the study did not want their identities to be revealed to others in the community.

Very quickly, the old place started to feel like a home. My partner at the time was able to take the summer away from her studies in Ottawa to help me through the first two months, and, before long, a neighbour's cat had also decided to join the household. Though I was forced to sublet another place for the last six weeks, when cold weather rendered the uninsulated dwelling uninhabitable, it served me very well through most of the research period.

Though the community that I lived in and its neighbour were home to all three of the clubs on the Barren Shore, it would be inaccurate to call this project a community study. Rather, the clubs seemed to provide a trans-community social space, which brought together people from a wide geographic area. It makes sense to look at these clubs as centres for the entire Barren Shore, rather than for just one community. In total, the twenty-five Gamblers that I interviewed represented seven different communities on the Shore, some living as far as thirty minutes drive away from the clubs. Only eight of the twenty-five actually resided in the communities that housed the clubs. For all of the three thousand residents of the Shore, these clubs were significantly easier to reach than the next closest ones, in the regional centre. Thus, most people who wanted to play VLTs went there, regardless of which community they lived in.³⁴

³⁴Many of those patrons that liked to drink at the club also commuted considerable distances. The very low police presence on the Shore meant that being caught for impaired driving was not a major concern. Several people informed me that, barring an emergency, the

My luckiest break of all came just a few days after we had moved into our new home. It was then that we met our next door neighbour, a crotchety, but warm-hearted, eighty-year-old World War II naval veteran, and his thirty-eight-year-old home care worker, who will be referred to throughout the text as 'Songbird'. Though I quickly found myself locked in a discussion with the veteran about the troubled state of the cod fishery, and didn't have much of a chance to speak with Songbird on this first occasion, she eventually became a very dear friend, and proved to be the single most important person in my developing research.

In the days and weeks that followed, I came to learn a lot more about Songbird's life. Like myself, she had originally been an outsider on the Barren Shore, having married into the community in 1980. Prior to that move, she had spent sojourns in both urban and rural areas in New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia. These experiences offered her a unique perspective on the nature of social life and of social change on the Barren Shore. She also happened to have done a number of correspondence courses at Memorial, including several in both anthropology and sociology, and had even done some interviewing for a project of her own a few years earlier. Her familiarity with anthropological thinking made her an ideal sounding board for my budding ideas. Lastly, and most importantly, until recently, she had been a very heavy VLT player. Though she had given up playing the machines altogether by the time my field work was completed, she provided a tremendous help in developing some preliminary ideas about which issues to pursue.

Songbird also helped me in a number of other ways. Firstly, she immediately welcomed me

police always visited the Shore at the same time every week. This made it very easy to avoid their gaze.

and my partner into her home. Before long, we had formed close relationships with her husband and two daughters, and with many of the several dozen teenage kids who she regularly allowed to occupy her house. She also introduced us to many other people in the area, helping us to develop a significantly larger social network. Secondly, Songbird was responsible for introducing me to many people in the core group of heavy Gamblers, that would eventually come to be the main focus of the study. Her popularity within the group helped me tremendously in securing preliminary interviews, and in cultivating a place within the bar scene. With her assistance, I was also able to develop friendships with several of the Gamblers, thereby giving me access to much deeper levels of insight into the day-to-day experiences associated with heavy VLT playing.

2.2 INITIAL FOCUS

The relative absence of ethnographic research into VLT gambling in Canada, and the complete absence of data for Atlantic Canada, prompted me to propose a set of research goals which were both broad and flexible. This, I hoped, would allow me the freedom to narrow the study, as I developed a clearer picture of the social scene being investigated. My initial foci were to include explorations of:

- The explicit and implicit motivations for playing VLTs offered by regular players on the Shore;
- The nature of the social changes brought about by the arrival of VLTs;
- The ways in which VLTs have been assimilated into the long folk tradition of gambling on the Shore;
- The demographic characteristics of the regular VLT playing community;
- The nature of the social relations between players;
- The degree of awareness that players hold about the involvement of the provincial government in the provision of the machines;
- The level of awareness that players had about the odds or expected payouts of VLTs, and the extent to which this information influenced the nature of play;
- The perspectives of members of the community who do not play VLTs.

Very quickly, I recognized that I simply wouldn't have time to collect sufficient data to adequately assess the perspectives of non-players in the region. Instead, I chose to focus exclusively on the perspectives of players, their families, club owners, and club staff. Though information offered by those who were not involved in the VLT scene was considered carefully, I chose to not spend time conducting in-depth interviews with these persons.

2.3 THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Throughout my research, I have employed a three-pronged approach involving: extensive interviewing; participant observation; and library and archival research. In the sections to follow, I will discuss each of these techniques in turn.

2.3.1 INTERVIEWS

On the advice of the first few players I met, I decided to postpone my entry into local clubs for a few weeks, until I had developed a better sense of what I was looking for. Instead, I first ventured into some of the clubs in the regional centre, where I could get a better idea of how the machines were played, and could practice observing and talking with VLT gamblers. Meanwhile, I decided to tape record some preliminary open-ended discussions with Songbird and the three other local gamblers she had introduced me to. I did this in an effort to make sense of what I witnessed in the regional centre, and test the validity of some of the information that I had obtained from my review of the gambling literature. I then made use of this data to put together a preliminary questionnaire.

Once I had developed a questionnaire, I began to collect a snowball sample of gamblers, by asking these initial participants to refer me to other people in the community, and then in turn,

asking these new participants for further suggestions. Though many players were very helpful, Songbird was particularly dedicated. She was eventually responsible for approaching more than half of the final set of interviewees on my behalf. Additional interviewees came from a variety of other sources. Some I met myself after I had begun to visit the local clubs. Still others were introduced to me by other members of the community, who were not gamblers themselves.

I soon began to realize that I was consistently being referred to the heavier gamblers in the community. Though many people in the area played occasionally, most people assumed that I was only interested in the heavy players. Most said things like: *"Oh, if you're interested in the games, you have to talk to Pat."* Initially, I found this pattern quite frustrating, because I had hoped to collect a sample which was more representative of the entire playing population. I eventually decided that it would be better to take advantage of the situation and focus exclusively on the heavier players. In addition, I was beginning to recognize that there was a sense of shared identity among many of the heavier players, which I wanted to explore further. Thus, while I continued to interview more occasional players and bartenders as a way of developing my understanding of the overall gambling scene, I limited my collection of comparative data to players who averaged at least seven hours of gambling per week.

In the end, I was able to perform at least one in depth interview with twenty-five of the heaviest players. In ten cases, I was able to do one or more follow up interviews as well. Two interviews with heavy players, both elderly women, were deleted from the sample, when it became clear that these persons had lied extensively in the information that they provided. For the most part, interviews were conducted in private homes, usually either mine or that of the participant. Since the clubs were the primary indoor public gathering places in the area, I found that homes

were the only setting in which confidential interviews could easily be conducted. In a few cases, I interviewed players in parked cars, or in restaurants or clubs in the regional centre where we were less likely to be noticed.

The interviews themselves can be best described as semi-structured. Though I did my best to allow the participants to dictate the flow of conversation, I made sure to explore certain issues, and had a predesigned set of comparative questions which I asked of each participant.³⁵ Interviews ranged from one to seven hours in length, with an average time of about an hour and forty-five minutes.

As time went on, and I obtained more information, I began to incorporate my new insights into new questions, which I then endeavoured to ask all new players, and all players who had been previously interviewed. While it was not always possible to obtain answers from all participants, I was pleased with the success that I had in getting back in touch with participants for follow up questioning. A similar strategy was employed in the interviewing of nine club owners and bartenders from the region, and the regional centre, two of whom were heavy enough gamblers to be included in the sample of players as well.

In my frequent visits back to the community, I have continued to take advantage of my regular contact with several of the heavy players to obtain updates, and to help me to clarify ambiguities in my data. These follow up discussions have been supplemented by visits to the clubs, which have allowed me to chat further with some other former interviewees.

2.3.2 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION (CLUB RESEARCH)

My first attempts at participation research in the regional centre were moderately

³⁵A list of sample questions is displayed in Appendix A.

successful at best. Though I was able to develop a better sense of the finer nuances of play, I found that most people with whom I struck up conversations were less than receptive. Most offered brief replies to my questions, and then returned to their playing. There were a few exceptions, however. Some players took tremendous interest in my work, and were quite willing to talk. Though I did not conduct any formal interviews with these players, these initial discussions helped tremendously in shaping the blueprint for the interview process.

I was much more hesitant about revealing myself to the club owners on the Barren Shore. My caution stemmed largely from my concern that the club owners would perceive of my research as a threat to their livelihoods. This fear was exacerbated by the input of a few of the Gamblers that I had spoken to when I first arrived in the area. Though I eventually found that all of the area club managers were quite accepting of my research, this initial warning led me to hold off on the participant observation component of my research for a few weeks. I worried that being blacklisted by the club staff before I had made contact with a sufficient number of gamblers could sabotage the entire effort. If I waited, I could at least make use of interview research from the Barren Shore, and could rely on participant observation from the regional centre. Thus, breaking from the methodology I laid out in my initial proposal, I decided to spend most of the first few weeks speaking with players privately. I only ventured into the clubs on a few strategic occasions, to play pool, scope out the research site, and watch the players from afar.

By the time that I eventually did reveal my intentions to the club staff, I had already gotten to know several of the players, and had even done some preliminary interviewing. Going to the club in the company of some of the regulars made the process of entering the club scene considerably easier for me. Several of the Gamblers that I met on these first occasions seemed to

accept me right away, perhaps because of the company I was keeping. Many seemed to be interested in my research, and particularly in why I had left my family in Ontario to come to Newfoundland, much less to the Barren Shore. In light of the high emigration rate in the area, an immigrant from the industrial core provided quite a curiosity.

Despite my favourable reception at the club, I decided, on the advice of Songbird, to avoid approaching players about interviews while they were in the club, unless it was absolutely necessary. She felt, wisely I think, that trying to have private conversations at the club could appear suspicious to the other players. Instead, I would ask Songbird or one of the other Gamblers to speak with the heavy players that they knew over the phone, or in person, about the possibility of doing an interview. If they were receptive to the idea, I would call them, or arrange to meet them to discuss the process further.

I endeavoured to enforce the distinction between my club persona and my interviewing persona at all times. When I met a player that I had interviewed while in the club, I would not bring up the information that we had discussed in our interview. I felt that, in addition to compromising our confidentiality agreement, conversations of this nature might make players feel more self-conscious, and could influence their gambling behaviour. Instead, I tried to limit my questions and comments to the more impersonal aspects of play, and would devote more of my time to quietly observing, gambling myself, or discussing other topics. In some situations, I would call or take aside one of the players after the playing session had ended to ask further questions about the events that I had witnessed in the club. I found that this system worked fairly well, as I was able to make use of what I saw in the clubs to inform my interview strategy, and vice versa. This enabled me to maintain a continual dialogue between these two worlds.

My role as an outsider clearly limited the extent to which I was able to assume a place within the group of Gamblers. Another major obstacle was my limited budget. Though my research was quite generously funded by ISER, I could not realistically expect to gamble at the level of the core group without bankrupting myself. This paradox was recognized by many of the Gamblers, several of whom loved to joke about prospect of a university student venturing into the field to do research about gambling, only to become an “*addict*” and blow his entire budget. Despite occasional goading from some of the regulars, I was able to maintain my composure, and get away with spending a limited amount. I did this with the help of three main strategies. One was to “*buddy up*” on a single machine with another player whenever possible. That way, I could have the experience of playing without spending too much of my money. The second was to downplay the size of my research salary. This allowed me to claim bankruptcy fairly regularly, and thereby keep my spending in check. Lastly, while I tended to bet low amounts, I made sure that on those few occasions where I was lucky enough to come out ahead, I was as generous as I possibly could be with my winnings. The fact that I quickly picked up on the reciprocal traditions of the free-spending traditions of the group was noticed by several players, who often invited me to take a few spins on their machines after I had run out of money. A few of the Gamblers that I had befriended were also quite generous in allowing me to share their machines. This charity allowed me to legitimately hang around the VLTs for a considerable period of time after I had exhausted my budget. In situations where I didn’t know anyone at the club well enough, I would occasionally nurse a drink or play a game of pool to pass some time until one of my closer friends arrived.

2.3.3 LIBRARY AND ARCHIVAL RESEARCH AND CONTEXTUAL INTERVIEWS

In addition to making active use of the Queen Elizabeth II library at Memorial University, especially the extremely helpful interlibrary loans department, I benefited tremendously from the regional information provided by the Centre for Newfoundland Studies, the Canadian Census, and Memorial's Maritime History Archive. In particular, I made great use of a number of undergraduate research essays about the region that were stored in the MHA. Most of these papers were catalogued in the extensive anthropology and history collections maintained by Tom Nemec and Jim Hiller, respectively. Most were written by students who were originally from the areas under study. I found that they offered me a level of detail and local insight that is unparalleled in the professional literature. As helpful as many of these papers were to me, I am not able to reference them specifically, because doing so would reveal the true identity of the Barren Shore. Instead, I have simply referenced them all under the general label "Student Essays." This decision was particularly difficult for me to make, but I believe that it was unavoidable. In the absence of credit, I would simply encourage future researchers to take advantage of these fine resources.

I was also able to draw from information provided by the Addiction Services library in St. John's and from the Community Health and Addictions Services and the Atlantic Lottery Corporation web sites. Finally, I conducted contextual interviews with Addiction Services counsellors from the Barren Shore, Atlantic Lottery Corporation executives, and former Newfoundland Finance Minister Paul Dicks. These helped me to get a better understanding of the context in which gambling emerged in the province, and of the current regulatory structure.

2.4 THE WRITING PROCESS AND ISSUES OF CONFIDENTIALITY

Due to the particular sensitivity of this topic, I have tried to take great pains to protect the identities of all those that agreed to participate in the study. To this end, I have decided to provide pseudonyms for the research site, and for all persons who are referred to specifically. Also, though I had initially thought of presenting several elaborate case studies, I have instead decided to not identify speakers as they are quoted in the text. Although all of the twenty-five players, and nine club employees are quoted, many repeatedly, I have chosen to let the quotes stand on their own, rather than attempting to provide unified portraits. Thus, while the same player may be described in several chapters, this is not made explicit.³⁶ Instead, I have tried to speak in general terms about the ideas that were expressed, and, in some cases, have used statistical representations to give a sense of how widely shared the various sentiments were. My decision is based on the fact that many of the players shared details of their lives with me, which they did not want revealed to any of the other participants. I feel that attributing several quotes or stories to a specific person, even if she is identified by a pseudonym, would make it easy for other members of the community to identify her, and would thereby jeopardize our confidentiality agreement. Wherever direct quotes from interviews with gamblers appear, they are represented by both italics and quotation marks. Quotes of published material and quotes taken from secondary sources are not represented by italics.

Another precaution which I took to ensure confidentiality was to alter certain minor details of certain participants' lives when profiling them. These embellishments were made only in

³⁶The one exception to this rule is Songbird, who agreed to be identified in more than one instance.

situations where I genuinely believed that modifying the information slightly would not change the meaning of the passage. For example, slight changes may have been made to a player's age, or the number of children that he had, but not to his career or gender. In one particularly sensitive case, I decided to blend the details of two player's lives together, so that neither one could be identified. Though I am less than comfortable with this technique, I feel that the potential cost to the players involved is too great to risk identifying them.

Chapter Three

THE CONSTRUCTION OF BOREDOM: CLUBS AND THE MODERNIZING OF WORK AND LEISURE ON THE BARREN SHORE

Since their initial introduction in the early 1970s, clubs have enjoyed immense popularity, and have emerged as a predominant social venue on the Barren Shore. They have provided a welcome antidote to the intense feelings of boredom and monotony that plague many area residents. This widespread sense of boredom is partially attributable to the major restructuring of the local economy that followed Confederation with Canada. This created a situation in which area residents needed to spend much less time than did past generations in securing the necessities of survival. In moving away from subsistence production, in favour of seasonal labour and transfer payments, many people have been left with a great deal of time which is not accounted for by work activities. In the mid to late 1990s, this situation was particularly acute for many TAGS recipients living in the region, some of whom were without employment for years at a time.

Clubs and VLTs have also benefited from the gradual encroachment of the mass media, which has redefined local perceptions about the what constitutes appropriate leisure practice. Increasingly, the small-scale, community-oriented leisure activities that characterized previous generations are being replaced by more commercialized and individuated activities. Under these conditions, clubs and VLTs have profited immensely, offering people on the Shore a unique opportunity fill up their excess time by blending social interaction, individualistic consumption, and the opportunity to engage in recreational gambling, a longstanding tradition on the Shore.

3.1 BOREDOM AS AN IMPETUS FOR PLAYING VLTs

The connection between collectively experienced feelings of boredom and the popularity of

VLTs on the Barren Shore was made clear to me in the opening minutes of my first interview.

Before I had even had the chance to direct a question at the interviewee, he offered me a short and simple explanation for the immense success of VLTs in the area:

If you ask me it's all just about boredom. There just isn't anything to do around here. If you've got a few extra dollars, that's just the thing to do. It's leisure time. For a lot of people, the more leisure time they have, the more they play. The more leisure time you have, the more time you have to think about going and, usually, the more you spend.

When asked about the origins of their boredom, few gamblers were able to provide any answers. Most players, particularly the younger ones, indicated that their hometowns had been mercilessly tedious places for as long as they could remember. A few of the others offered a different explanation. They looked to dramatic transformations in the local economy in recent decades as an explanation for the prevailing sentiment of ennui. Whereas in years past, subsistence activities demanded a great deal of time, a variety of social changes that have occurred over the last century have eliminated the need to perform many of these tasks. This has created a great deal of 'free' time that had not been there before and, in turn, produced a voracious demand for new activities to fill this time. This point was raised by a fisherman in his forties who struggled to explain the reasons behind his gambling:

In years past, there was never much in the way of recreation, because people were too badly needed elsewhere to be involved in anything that wasn't of importance. Now, with the lack of fish and one thing and another, there's very little to be doin' with yourself. What else are you supposed to do?

This point is mirrored in much of the literature relating to the idea of boredom. For example, Brisset and Snow emphasize the importance of "freedom from necessity" in creating "conditions where boredom can so easily, and effortlessly, be experienced" (1993: 244). They claim that prior

to modern times, “mundane life was hard but not boring” (Ibid. 245).

Historical evidence supports the argument that residents of the Shore used to be busier. Prior to Confederation with Canada, most nuclear family units were responsible for a wide range of subsistence activities including: growing all of their own vegetables; tending to horses, cows, pigs sheep, goats, and/or chickens; cutting, drying, and storing hay to feed the animals; hunting; preserving foods (bottling, salting etc.); gathering, transporting, and chopping enough wood to heat their homes and supply them with building materials; performing all of their own construction and repair projects; sewing and/or knitting most of their own clothes, bedding, and other household items; fetching enough water for themselves and their animals; berry picking; and, of course, preparing for and participating in the labourious inshore cod fishery, which required not only long hours on the water, but also long hours on land salting and drying fish, and repairing nets and other equipment.

Many of these practices were transformed or abandoned altogether in the decades following Confederation, due in large part to two interrelated factors: the restructuring of the local economy, and the introduction of new labour saving technologies. The sections that follow, provide a brief sketch of the effects that each of these transformations had in freeing up more time for other pursuits.

3.1.1 THE MOVE TOWARD WAGE LABOUR

The most significant impetus for moving away from subsistence practices was the introduction of unemployment insurance. After Confederation, many people turned their attention to securing enough weeks of wage labour, whether through the fishery or otherwise, to qualify them for EI payments. Since most of the wage labour that was available in the region was

seasonal, most people were forced to stop working in the winter and rely extensively on government transfer payments. The wider availability of cash allowed most families to purchase a greater proportion of their food and clothing and this, in turn, created a gradual move away from practices such as gardening, tending livestock, hunting, and sewing. Freedom from these obligations made available a great deal of time that had otherwise been accounted for by subsistence production.

This process was accelerated further in the 1970s, when the greater availability of wage labour in fish plants led to an increase in the cash incomes of most families. By the 1980s, the transition to wage labour and government payments was almost complete. Most households had become at least partially dependent on some combination of employment income and transfer payments. Although some subsistence practices continue to be practised, in varying degrees, by people in the area to this day, the cash economy has now become solidly entrenched.

In the 1990s, the cod moratorium freed up even more time for a certain class of people. Almost overnight, a large proportion of the workforce were suddenly thrust out of work by the closure of the fishery.³⁷ For many of these people, the moratorium brought their first experience of year round unemployment. Though most had grown accustomed to working seasonally, a number of people said that the closure of the fishery had left them with much more time to fill.³⁸ This time

³⁷In some Barren Shore communities, as many as forty percent of the workforce were left unemployed by the moratorium.

³⁸The problem of boredom during the moratorium era may be even more extreme in communities which enjoyed a year-round offshore fishery, such as those on the 'South Coast' of the island. On the Barren Shore, the tradition of seasonal labour allowed many people to grow accustomed to filling up time in other ways. Thus, for people in these communities, the adjustment process was probably less unsettling.

off is due, in part, to the fact that the closure of the fishery eliminated the need to perform time-consuming off-season duties, such as repairing nets and boats.

3.1.2 THE INTRODUCTION OF LABOUR SAVING TECHNOLOGIES

A second set of changes that served to restructure the nature of labour for Barren Shore residents came in the form of technological innovations. A variety of labour saving devices were introduced to the region in the decades following Confederation. These additions reduced the amount of time that had to be devoted to subsistence activities. Some of the most significant additions included:

a) Electricity and Electrical Appliances

Though the wealthiest merchant families had electrified their homes as early as the 1930s, it was not until after Confederation that it became affordable for the majority of families. In the fifties and sixties, the greater availability of cash allowed for the electrification of most area homes. With the advent of electricity came a variety of labour saving devices. Some of the most important electrical innovations included electric stoves, washers and driers, sewing machines, and home freezers.

b) Oil Furnaces and Ranges

Another major change came with the introduction of oil furnaces and ranges. These devices eliminated the need for men to spend long hours each winter gathering and chopping wood. Though some families continue to use wood to this day, most have moved to oil, encouraged by increasing government restrictions on wood cutting. In the 1970s, many households converted to electric base board heaters instead.

c) Running Water and Sewage

Most homes in the area did not have running water or sewage facilities until the late seventies. These technologies eliminated the need to gather water and maintain outhouses.

d) Automobiles and the Paving of the Main Road

Automobiles were first introduced to the area in the late 1950s. The first cars were restricted to the merchant class, however, and were not affordable for most area residents. It was not until after the main road was paved in the late 1970s that less affluent people began to buy cars. Before this period, people were solely dependent on boats and on horses and carts for their transportation needs. A train had run through the area until the 1920s and 30s but was eventually terminated.

Limited transportation opportunities severely limited the extent to which people would venture from their home communities. Cars had a number of immediate effects on the nature of the work cycle. Firstly, they reduced the need to keep horses since it served as a more effective way of transporting both goods and humans. They also lessened the need to engage in hunting, gardening and animal husbandry, because they allowed people to travel to larger centres more easily. This enabled them to get better deals on food, rather than being forced to pay the exorbitant prices of local merchants. The paving of the road also made it easier for suppliers to get their goods to the residents of the Shore more quickly. As meat, vegetables, milk, and eggs became more widely available and affordable, there was even less incentive to participate in hunting, animal husbandry, and horticulture.

3.1.3 THE SOCIAL CONSEQUENCES OF 'FREE TIME'

The role played by unemployment in forcing outport people to fill up time was illustrated ethnographically by Cato Wadel in Now Whose Fault Is That: The Struggle for Self-Esteem in the Face of Chronic Unemployment. Wadel (1973) chronicles the story of an unemployed man, who he calls George. When George ceases to be able to secure work in the logging industry, he is left with a great deal of unoccupied time. This presents a problem for George, because of the strong taboo against laziness that governs social life in the region. Wadel quotes George as saying: "I have to have somethin' to keep me busy -- a man has to have *somethin'* to do" (1973: 59). In an effort to overcome this problem, George directs his efforts toward subsistence activities. In the absence of a source of regular employment, George throws himself into other time-filling endeavours such as fishing, hunting, growing vegetables, cutting wood, and performing construction and repair projects in his work shed or 'store.' In addition to filling up time, these projects also served to uphold his status as a hard worker in the eyes of other community members.

The difficulty faced by unemployed people on the Barren Shore today, whether they are dependent on social assistance, TAGS, or EI, is that, unlike George, they do not have a wide a range of subsistence activities to fall back on. By the 1990s, the dependence of most households on new technologies and the cash economy had become so deeply entrenched that a reversion to subsistence living was simply not possible. Many of these persons had never known a life of self-sufficiency. Though some continued to hunt, pick berries, or chop wood, these activities were not sufficient to keep them occupied for much of the year. This was a great source of anxiety for many Barren Shore residents, several of whom said that they couldn't stand to be without something to

do. If they were not occupied by employment or work around the home, they needed to find something else to keep them busy. For many people, the club offered an enticing distraction. One heavy gambler, who had been put out of work by the closure of the fishery declared:

When certain aspects of your life or your livelihood break down, you've got a tendency to look for something to try to fill that gap. Over the past few years, especially since the moratorium has been on, there's a lot of people filling the gap with those games. If they were busy with the fishery, they wouldn't have time for that. When your work habits change, your other habits change too, to fill in the void...I think that a lot of people around here have too much time on their hands. If you've got a steady job, you're not going to be playing the machines. They're not on your mind. You're too busy. I'm sure the high unemployment here has a lot to do with it.

The club helped to solve some of the problems created by unemployment, because it provided both a source of activity, and a way of upholding a social network. Both of these outlets became extremely important for people who could no longer count on their work roles to satisfy these requirements. The social void left by unemployment was recognized by Wadel, who argued that his unemployment left George both economically and socially deprived. He was economically deprived because the loss of his job led to a reduction in his income, and socially deprived because it took away his venue for meeting and conversing with others, his source of conversational currency, and his status in the community. These problems also weighed heavily on the minds of unemployed people on the Barren Shore. Although those persons receiving TAGS or EI did not suffer major reductions in income, most unemployed people had difficulties in upholding their social connections with their former workmates. They also were left without the sense of identity that was provided by the work role. As will be discussed more extensively in chapter two, some people were able to overcome this problem by creating non-work communities within the social space of the club.

Though the aforementioned economic changes appear to have created more time for other pursuits, the mere existence of more time does not fully explain why the club has assumed an exalted status on the Barren Shore as the most desirable way to fill that time. It is perhaps self-evident to say that any claim that there is 'nothing to do' presupposes an understanding of what does or does not constitute 'something to do.' In saying that they have nothing else to do, the players are effectively saying that there are no activities which they deem to be more worthy of doing. As sociologist Peter Conrad points out:

Boredom stems not from expectations rooted in our nature, but from failing to meet socially derived expectations...(it) is not characteristic of an object, event or person, but exists in the relationship between individuals and their interpretation of their experience (1997: 468).

Thus, in order to better understand the immense popularity of clubs in the contemporary era, we must first examine the social and historical conditions under which they rose to prominence.

3.2 THE EMERGENCE OF CLUBS

The first licensed club on the Barren Shore opened its doors in 1970.³⁹ It proved to be an instant hit, attracting patrons from a wide range of age groups. Almost immediately, it began to replace homes and churches as the primary socializing venue for area residents. By the end of the decade, five different clubs were competing for local business. There were also countless others in the regional centre, which drew some of the younger people from the Shore.

In its first years, the club was an almost exclusively male domain. The extent to which the

³⁹Though there had been a few small taverns which sold homemade beer in the area in the 1920s, few residents were old enough to remember them. The 1970 figure may also be challenged on the grounds that another club had been constructed in the vicinity of the fish plant in the regional centre three years earlier. This club had attracted several regular patrons from the Barren Shore (Student Essays).

club dominated the male social world in this period is evident in this passage taken from an undergraduate essay written by a resident of the Barren Shore in the early 1970s.

“Today, as in previous years, men spend very little time in the house except for eating, sleeping, or a game or cards in the winter time. If they are not working, they are usually having a beer at the club” (Student Essays).

This brings up an important point which was also touched on by Wadel in 1973. This is that the strict, gender-based division of labour that has long characterized most outports has created a situation in which many men are uncomfortable with being around the house during the day. Even when they were not fishing or in the woods, the majority of the community-based work that was done by men took place away from the home, usually in fishing sheds or ‘stores.’ It is not surprising that when work obligations vanished, the club took on greater importance as a haven for this ‘male culture.’ Women were eventually able to make inroads, however, thanks in large part to the developing practice of holding dances and wedding receptions at the club, and by the entry of women into the wage labour sector, allowing them to pay their own ways. By the 1980s, most clubs had established themselves as co-ed environments, with several offering male, female and often mixed dart and pool leagues.

The allure of the club was bolstered, in no small measure, by the fact that it provided one of the first real opportunities to obtain effectively limitless quantities of alcohol on the Shore. Though the practice of making home brewed beer, wine, or ‘moonshine’ had been present for generations, the high cost of sugar, and the moral authority of the church, tended to keep alcohol consumption restricted to small quantities on special occasions. In later years, alcohol had become available through bootleggers or during trips to larger centres but, again, the high cost of these purchases meant that few people could afford to drink regularly or in large quantities. It was only

with the advent of the club, and the liquor stores that soon followed, that heavy drinking developed as a regular pastime for many area residents. Cost, though still a factor, was less of a burden in the club era due to the fact that the success of the fishery in this period had provided a large supply of jobs for both men and women. The combination of higher wages from processing plants and unemployment insurance led to unprecedented income levels for many households.

The tremendous popularity of clubs continued into the eighties, as the expansion of the offshore fishing sector led to steadily increasing incomes. The higher numbers of clubs competing for this newly-found cash gradually led to greater specialization. Some offered live traditional music, while others tried to cater to younger crowds with more contemporary rock bands. In either case, dances were common weekend activities. Many clubs set up pool, dart, or card leagues or tournaments. Some even took to holding bingo games on week days. Pinball and video games were also introduced to a number of clubs in this period, and became very popular for some patrons. In describing the immense popularity and variety of clubs at the time, one player explained:

That was my era. The bars were always blocked (full) on the weekends. There wasn't much else to do on a Friday or Saturday night. There were four clubs right in this area that were all going strong. They were always packed to the doors. The bar scene was very important in the eighties, especially for folks my age, between twenty and thirty. It was also important for the older generations. Whenever there was traditional music our parents would be there with their cronies. We used to go elsewhere, cause we were the bad-ass crowd that used to smoke up at the club. We'd usually look for a place with a pool tournament or something instead.

By the onset of the 1990s, the local clubs had come to be an important social space for many Barren Shore residents. In addition to serving as drinking and gambling establishments, they had become the main site for meeting up with friends:

I get to see some of my friends who don't come by the house like they used to. That's our social setting now. That's where we meet. The only time they stop by now is on their way to the club or on their way back.

It had also come to serve a number of other functions such as catching up on the freshest gossip:

It gives you a chance to keep track of what is going on in other people's lives from one week to the next. I love the game itself but its also an opportunity to mingle and to have a laugh.

and finding out about social events:

If you aren't up to the club to socialize with your buddies, you might miss out on a trip to a cabin or something. A lot of people use the club to keep in touch with all their social gatherings.

It also provided an opportunity to get away from a child or spouse for a few hours when a player needed a break from his home life. Furthermore, many people had grown accustomed to using the club as a place to court prospective mates. Thirteen of the twenty-five Gamblers (52%) interviewed were single, and an additional six (24%) admitted to, or were widely rumoured to be having one or more extra-marital affairs.⁴⁰ The club stood as one of the only opportunities these persons had for meeting other 'available' people. Whether they were looking for a permanent coupling, or a more casual liaison, the romantic lives of many of the regular players had become completely dependent on the informal matchmaking service provided by the club.

3.2.1 THE SECULARIZATION OF ENTERTAINMENT: CLUBS AND THE DECLINING POWER OF CHURCHES

Prior to the arrival of clubs, most public social activities on the Barren Shore were organized through church social clubs. Both Catholic and United (protestant) churches maintained two gender-segregated social clubs. These groups would meet regularly, usually weekly during

⁴⁰In many cases, these affairs were with other regular VLT gamblers.

the winter and monthly during the summer, to deal with the business of the church. In addition to organizing social functions, they were responsible for such things as: keeping up, and repairing the church grounds (men); cleaning the inside of the church (women); and raising money for those in need (both genders, but mostly women) (Student Essays).

Most other church social events can be subsumed under the general category of 'times'.⁴¹ These events usually consisted of suppers and dances with live music (Catholic church) or concerts, recitations, and plays (United church). Often, these events would continue into the early hours of the morning. Though custom prohibited alcohol at times, homemade wine or beer would occasionally be sneaked in (Ibid.). In the summer, times were usually reserved for special occasions, because the work schedule was so demanding. On these occasions, it was common for people from nearby communities to visit for the day, and stay into the night for a 'time' (Ibid.). In the winter, times were held much more frequently. Weather permitting, there were always weekly dances in the winter. Other events organized through the church included garden parties, potluck suppers, and bake sales (Ibid.).

While exposure to television and other media in the 1960s had already begun to weaken the power of the church on the Shore, the arrival of clubs presented a further secularizing influence. The freedom the club provided to consume alcohol liberally drew many church goers away from church social functions. This caused times and church-sponsored concerts, dances, and social clubs to gradually decline in popularity. While many people, particularly Protestants and older Catholics, continue to stay away from clubs to this day, many area residents have now reached the

⁴¹An in depth discussion of 'times' in northeastern Newfoundland is offered by James C. Faris (1966) in Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement.

point where they will at least go to the club on some occasions. Some players drew a dichotomy between those community residents who continued to be closely affiliated with the church and those who had moved away from religious institutions in favour of the club lifestyle. Some of the regular club goers seemed to derive a sense of pride from the fact that they were not regular church goers. It seemed that, for these persons at least, the club had emerged as the very symbol of fun in the region. In the context of the club, people could experiment with a wide variety of new forms of behaviour which were deemed unacceptable by the church. Being a part of this rebellious group provided people with a distinct sense of personal identity. As one gambler joked:

You either go one way or the other. If you stay with the church crowd, you're stuck with all the pious ones. If you go with the bar crowd, it's just as well to sink deeper into the fucking pit.

Though about half of the regular gamblers polled were still church goers at the time of my study, very few went every week, and even fewer maintained an involvement in the management of the church.

The transition to a wage-labour economy also created a push toward clubs. As fish plants became the primary source of income for area residents, the demands of the work week became an important force in structuring leisure activities. Whereas the subsistence economy allowed for most people to stop work and socialize together on special occasions, the plant and other wage labour occupations did not offer workers such flexibility. Since most plants operated virtually twenty-four hours a day during the peak season, it became less possible for the church to structure social events on a community basis.

Furthermore, 'shift-mates' emerged as an important social group that had not existed before. Often, these persons were not from the same communities and did not attend the same

religious institutions. These newly formed relationships called for a venue in which co-workers from different backgrounds could socialize together. The club provided just that. Though it was used primarily by Catholics, it did not exclude people of other religious persuasions. Also, since it was open for most of the day, it was much easier for shift workers to go to the club to socialize together on pay-days than it would have been to wait for church-sponsored social events.

3.2.2 SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND THE MOVE AWAY FROM ENTERTAINING IN HOMES

The advent of clubs also seems to have moved many people away from the practice of entertaining in homes. This trend appears to be related to the emergence of social stratification in the region. Historically, the Barren Shore had only two classes: the extremely wealthy merchant class and everyone else. As the region began to enjoy greater prosperity, greater divisions began to emerge among the working class.

Under these new circumstances, entertaining in homes became increasingly difficult for people with the lowest incomes. Entertaining usually called for a significant expenditure on the part of the host. Visits, even those that were unanticipated, were often accompanied by offers of tea, baked goods or, in later years, alcohol. These were not insubstantial expenses for some area residents. Also, entertaining forced people to display the insides of their homes. If a person's house was lacking in terms of appliances, food, or other indicators of wealth, she left herself open to gossip or mockery by other members of the community. Clubs, bingo halls, and other public venues avoided this problem by allowing people to socialize on neutral ground. Even though people's behaviour within these establishments reflected their social standing, clubs did present an opportunity for people from all segments of the socioeconomic spectrum to interact without issue.

As long as someone could afford a drink to nurse through the night, or a small entry fee, he could feel that he had a legitimate place alongside everyone else.

3.3 THE EMERGENCE OF VLTs

VLTs have, no doubt, benefited from their location in clubs. It appears, however, that the warm receptions that the machines have received has been enhanced by other socio-cultural factors as well. Two of the most significant are the long tradition of gambling on the Barren Shore, and the social influence of television in shaping local notions about what constitutes entertainment.

3.3.1 GAMBLING AND REGIONAL IDENTITY

The people of the Barren Shore are not new to gambling. In fact, some seemed to regard it as an important part of their self-definition as Newfoundlanders. A few players described gambling as a part of their nature. Others commented on the importance of gambling as a regional tradition. As one regular VLT player put it:

This is like the gambling capital of the world. Gambling is a way of life here. It's a tradition.

Further to this point, some players indicated that gambling served as a metaphor for other aspects of social life in the area, particularly the fishery. It was fairly common to hear people describe fishing as “a gamble.” Interestingly, the five Gamblers that drew this comparison were all men and had all been employed as fishermen at some point. Most spoke about the riskiness of depending on an economically unstable profession such as fishing, where one's catch and income could fluctuate dramatically from one year to the next.

The fishery is a gamble. My dad always told me to get my education and get into something. Get a trade or something. He always said that fishing is nothing but a gamble. Now because it was a gamble, I took it as a challenge. I wanted to see what it would be like. Of course, I really liked it and I ended up becoming a fisherman. And I've always gambled, every year since I've been at it. Everything about living on this rock is a gamble. I think most Newfoundlanders are gamblers, whether they're in the fishery or not. Most all of us originated from fisher-people. Maybe it's just something in our nature or our tradition or whatever.

Others looked to the physical danger associated with North Atlantic fishing in bringing about an acceptance of risk in the minds of Barren Shore residents. Some said that even living on the Shore was a risk.

People around here are risk takers in every way. It's probably in our nature, because the basic things in life here are gambles.

Even those gamblers that did not feel as though there was a parallel between other aspects of life on the Shore and the popularity of gambling admitted to having been exposed to games of chance from an early age.⁴² Though the landscape of available wagering opportunities has changed considerably since Confederation, the propensity of Barren Shore residents toward gambling has remained steady throughout.

3.3.1.1 A HISTORY OF GAMBLING ON THE BARREN SHORE (1900-1999)

1900-1949

Prior to Confederation, the primary gambling activity engaged in by Barren Shore men was

⁴²Gambling on the Shore is very much a Catholic tradition. Whereas most Protestant churches enforced strong prohibitions against gambling, the Catholic churches in the area were not nearly as condemning, and have used card games and bingo as fund raising devices for decades. Though the practice of playing cards for pleasure was common in Protestant households as well, wagering was quite rare.

card playing.⁴³ Many games were played merely for fun, but small wagers would often be made as well. Though cash prizes were rarely offered, it was not uncommon for each player to put in a small cash ante, and play for an item that was of use to everyone.⁴⁴ Though it was uncommon for women to gamble in this period, some did play cards from time to time. Lottery-style gambling was also a part of life in these years. It was common for a Christmas raffle to be held each year for presents and, in later years, the practice of drawing lots for fishing berths emerged (Student Essays).

1950-1970

After Confederation, the Catholic church assumed a more active role in the provision of gambling games, when it began to recognize the revenue-generating potential of holding card games in the parish hall.⁴⁵ These games were usually held for prizes rather than for cash. The tradition of playing in homes also continued, with poker enjoying newfound popularity. The turn toward the cash economy that accompanied the years following Confederation led to a more frequent use of money as a stake.

By the 1960s, bingo emerged as a new revenue generating device for the parish. These games were also played for prizes rather than cash. Very quickly, they attracted an enormous following, particularly among women. This period also saw increasing numbers of women partaking in church card games.

⁴³The most popular games included '120s,' '45s,' and 'Cribbage.'

⁴⁴Common prizes included: a tub of margarine, or an animal (usually a rabbit, a rooster, or in high stakes games, a foal) (Student Essays).

⁴⁵The most commonly played games at the parish hall were '120s' and '45s.'

1970-1980

The seventies saw a number of important changes to local gambling practices. Cards remained popular, both in churches and in homes. One notable difference is that all-female card parties became more common. This may be tied to the increasing involvement of women in the wage labour economy.

Bingo also continued to grow in popularity during this period. By the end of the decade, the newly paved road allowed more easy access to larger bingo halls in the regional centre. These games were preferred by many people because they were generally played for cash prizes. The lack of affordable transportation limited the extent to which these games were patronized by Barren Shore residents, however.

This decade also brought clubs into the gambling fold. As clubs began to proliferate throughout the region, they quickly emerged as centres for gambling activity. Though games of 120s and 45s were still commonly organized by churches, cribbage and poker came to be associated with the club. It was not unheard of for a large game of 120s to be held at the club from time to time as well. Sometimes the club games would be for prizes, such as a bucket of salt beef, but cash was a common stake as well. A few clubs even experimented with bingo on week nights, but this custom was eventually left to the bingo halls and churches.

By the end of the decade, pool and darts became available through the clubs, and both games were commonly wagered upon privately. Leagues for these two games became immensely popular activities in the area. Usually the winner would receive a bottle of rum, a turkey for Christmas, or some other prize that would be appreciated by all. Eventually, most clubs offered men's, women's and mixed dart leagues.

1980-1990

By the eighties, private card games had become more common. This came largely at the expense of the church games. Home-based card parties emerged as popular winter leisure activities for both men and women alike. Usually, games were held weekly, but some groups would play several nights a week. These contests were almost invariably for cash, although the denominations used were often quite small, serving primarily as symbolic gestures. Cards also continued in clubs, with cribbage tournaments emerging as a preferred activity as well.

Bingo became extremely popular in the eighties with the advent of the "*bingo bus*." This caravan would transport people to and from large bingo halls in the regional centre each night. Some Barren Shore residents would take the hour long bus ride most every night. The flood of new customers into the bingo halls allowed for larger prizes which, in turn, drew more people. Though still a female dominated activity, this period saw more men taking up bingo as well. During this era, bingo halls also began to sell break-open tickets between games.

Clubs also continued to be powerful forces in the local gambling scene during this period. Leagues and tournaments for both darts and pool grew in popularity, allowing for larger leagues and more regular games. Sports betting also became a popular activity through the club, as large hockey and football pools started to be managed by the club owners. The third major addition to the gambling repertoire of the clubs in the eighties were video games. Arcade style games such as Pac-man, pinball, and table top poker became regular fixtures in most clubs. Though none of these games actually payed out money, it was not long before the clubs had set up illegal high-score pools, which allowed people to gamble on them privately. Gambling was particularly common on the table-top poker games, which many interviewees described as the ancestors of modern VLTs.

Some players didn't distinguish between these earlier machines and the modern VLTs. A few commented that they had been playing "*the games*" since the early eighties.

The most significant change in this period was the expansion of the presence of the Atlantic Lottery Corporation on the Shore. Though the ALC had been operating in the province since the early eighties, their presence in more remote areas remained quite limited for a number of years. Though lottery tickets could be purchased in regional centres and break open tickets had begun to infiltrate some bingo halls, smaller communities did not have access to these games without travelling a considerable distance. This situation had changed by the end of the decade, as amendments to federal legislation made it possible for the ALC to introduce a wide range of new lottery tickets to most Barren Shore grocery stores. These included both sweepstakes style lotteries such as 649, and instant win lotteries such as break-open and scratch tickets. Thanks to this broad accessibility, all of these lotteries enjoyed a meteoric rise in popularity.

1990-1999

In the nineties, the ALC has gained an even stronger foothold in Newfoundland, with both revenues and profits derived from gambling in the province steadily increasing throughout the decade. This has occurred despite a significant decrease in the overall population. Some of the increase may be attributable to new variations on old lottery games, but the greatest factor has undoubtedly been the arrival of VLTs in the province.

In the case of the Barren Shore, the growing popularity of these ALC games appears to have been at the expense of other gambling games. Local residents that I spoke to agreed that pool, darts, video games, cards and bingo had all suffered marked decreases in popularity over the course of the decade. Most people drew a direct correlation between the loss of interest in these

games and the arrival of VLTs. By the time that I began my research, there was only one severely warped pool table to be found. One man, who had formerly been a regular pool player, explained:

I play pool much less since I started playing the machines. The last time I played was over a year ago. Now if those slot machines weren't there, I'd be over there playing pool right now. I find that, in general, people have lost interest in pool. It has definitely declined since the machines came in. The only people who play pool are teenagers who don't have enough money to play the slot machines. The older generation goes right to the games.

Darts had suffered a decline as well. When I arrived, I found that there was only one club that offered open tournaments on the weekends. No leagues were in operation. When I spoke to the local bartenders, I was told that early in the decade, each of the three bars in that area had offered separate men's, women's and mixed leagues.

At one time, you would get eight or nine dart leagues at the club, now you can barely get one.

The one bar owner that did still offer darts said that he had tried to get a league started the year before but he couldn't get enough interest. One woman, who had been a dart player prior to becoming involved with VLTs, offered a theory about the way in which VLTs had eroded interest in darts.

Most of the clubs shut darts down, because it wasn't making them any money anymore. You see, it would take everyone so long to shoot. Somebody on the team would always be playing the machines between turns. It got to the point where every dart night would drag on until twelve or twelve-thirty. Eventually everyone just lost interest.

Organized card games were rarely held in clubs by the time that I began my research, though cribbage boards were still brought out occasionally. Video games and pinball had also disappeared from most establishments.

The impact of VLTs on games that are not held in clubs, such as home-based card games

and bingo is less clear. Most players agreed that cards were less popular than they had been in years past, but most blamed out-migration and television more readily than they did VLTs. A few of the VLT players indicated that they would be happy to play cards instead, but the groups that they used to play with had gradually drifted apart, usually because one or more of their members had moved away or dropped out.

Bingo attendance also declined, but VLTs do not appear to have been the only factor. Though the VLTs were implicated as the cause of the decline by a few former bingo players, the greatest reason appears to have been the commencement of TV bingo in the mid 1990s. These broadcasts were immensely popular, often bringing large groups of family members and friends together to play. TV bingo seems to have won the favour of many of the bingo faithful, many of whom were getting older and found travelling to bingo halls more arduous than they had in years past.

3.3.1.2 VLTs WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE RURAL NEWFOUNDLAND CLUB

Though VLTs are quite new to the club scene, they have very quickly assumed an important role within it, redefining the social space of many outport clubs. All of the clubs on the Barren Shore positioned all five of their VLTs in a horizontal row, with tall wooden bar stools close at hand. The VLTs tended to be positioned in one of three places within the spatial layout of an establishment. In restaurants, and in some clubs in larger centres, VLTs are often allocated to a special room, out of the view of the other patrons. This was not the case in the communities on the Barren Shore, however, as there are no restaurants with VLTs, and most clubs are only one room establishments. The three clubs on the Shore have, instead, opted for one of two other structural styles.

In two of the clubs, VLTs were located in very close proximity to the bar. Both club owners decided to position other bar leisure activities, such as dart boards, tables and chairs, and in one case a pool table, on the other side of the machines, much farther away from the bar. When asked about why they chose this layout, both said that they had decided to put VLTs where they did because of the low volume of customers in the club. With the exception of weekends or days when many people received checks, it was quite rare for any of the clubs to have more than ten customers at one time. Often there were only one or two. This was especially true during the afternoons. Most often, these patrons came to the club for the purpose of playing VLTs, and many did not drink at all. By contrast, most heavy drinkers tended to frequent the club on the busiest nights, such as Friday and Saturday. The decision to position VLTs near the bar was an effort to maximize interaction between all of the bar's patrons, and to allow bartenders to converse with their friends while they were playing VLTs. In one case, the bar owner also enjoyed playing, and having the machines close by allowed him the freedom to run back and forth between his machine and the bar.

The third club located the machines by the entrance to the club, out of the view of the bartender, and put dart boards and tables and chairs between the machines and the bar. The manager of the club said that he had decided to put them there because he didn't like to see his friends losing money. Instead, he preferred to chat with whomever was sitting at the bar, and leave the VLT players to be by themselves. This club tended to be the most popular of the three for most of the Gamblers. Some said that this was because it allowed them the freedom to slip in and out of the club without becoming involved in lengthy discussions with the bartenders or the other patrons. This was useful when they were in a hurry, when they wanted to play the machines

without interruption, or when they only wanted to talk to their gambling friends. Others liked the fact that they didn't have to interact as much with the drinking crowd. For many of the players at this establishment, the only involvement they had with the non-players in the club was when they had to get change from the bartender or when they decided to cash in a payment stub after a win. Often, they didn't even have to go to the bar in these situations, however, because several of the bartenders had taken to bringing change or payment money over to them when the club was not too busy. This setup has much in common with the separate room structure, because it fosters a situation in which the social setting surrounding the machines is divorced somewhat from the social setting surrounding the bar and the rest of the club.

Many players had noticed that this latter structure, or the separate room structure, had gained prominence in most of the clubs in the regional centre, and in St. John's. Some took it upon themselves to express their beliefs that VLTs were having a negative effect on the level of conversation in many clubs. Five players commented that, prior to the introduction of the machines, people were much more apt to sit at tables and talk, or to converse with others while playing darts or pool. Some complained that VLT players were often so concerned with their games that they either restricted their conversations to other players, or didn't talk at all. Many people saw this as a very negative bi-product of the machines. One heavy Gambler went so far as to say that he felt that VLTs had *"destroyed social life in the clubs of Newfoundland."* Though most players did not specifically comment on the positioning of the machines, two players said that they had noticed that players talked to other patrons more when the machines were positioned closer to the bar.

3.3.1.2.1 THE “SWINGING BELLS” GAME

While the “Swinging Bells” game is not the only brand of VLT available in Newfoundland, it was by far the most common in the research site. Of the fifteen VLTs available, thirteen were Swinging Bells machines. Thus, for simplicity’s sake, I have decided to focus only on these games. The Swinging Bells game differed from conventional slot machines in a number of ways. Firstly, it offer players the choice of playing either a spinning wheel game or a poker game.⁴⁶ Slot machines, by contrast, tend to offer spinning wheel games only. Furthermore, the spinning wheel games that are offered by slot machines are often quite simple, consisting of only one row of three or more symbols. Generally, players win when they receive a combination in which all or most of these symbols are matching. The Swinging Bells machine, on the other hand, offers a spinning wheel game that more closely resembles the game tic-tac-toe, with three rows and three columns, allowing players to win by matching symbols across rows, down columns, or along diagonals.⁴⁷

A second way in which the Swinging Bells game differs from slot machines is that it offers a variety of special combinations of symbols, which bring about especially large wins. Two such wins are possible, the ‘swinging bells’ and the ‘bonus.’ The swinging bells are won when the player gets a cross of bells down the middle column and across the middle row of the screen. When a player “*hits the bells*,” the animated bells on the screen swing back and forth and an electronic jingle is played. This event typically draws the attention of all those present, if the reaction of the player has not already done so. In addition to the payout received for hitting the

⁴⁶Some other brands of VLTs offer a wider variety of games to choose from.

⁴⁷The seven types of symbols in the Swinging Bells game are: bells, sevens, gold bars, watermelons, cherries, oranges and plums.

bells (usually about triple the value of the bet), the player has the opportunity to play in the 'fever mode'⁴⁸ for ten spins. While "*in the fever*," she must strive to get as many bells as she can in order to boost the total of her winnings.⁴⁹ On average, after having hit the bells and gone through the fever, a player can expect to receive a dollar amount which equals approximately two hundred times the amount that she initially bet.⁵⁰ For example, a player betting fifteen credits (\$0.75) per spin could expect to win about three thousand credits (\$150), while a player betting the maximum of fifty credits (\$2.50) per spin could expect to win about ten thousand credits (\$500).

The 'bonus' has no fixed value. Rather, it builds incrementally, each time a player gets a row of gold bars. The value of the bonus can be as high as five thousand credits (\$250), but will not build any higher. In practice, it rarely gets that high. It is won whenever a player gets an entire screen of fruit symbols, as long as they are betting eight credits (\$0.40) or higher. In other words, any combination consisting solely of cherries, watermelons, oranges, and plums. Like the bells, winning the bonus brings about an electronic jingle, though it is significantly different from the one that is played after someone hits the bells. Players who "*hit the bonus*" may win considerably higher than the actual value of the bonus, if they line up fruit symbols as well.⁵¹

⁴⁸The term 'fever' was coined by the manufacturers of the Swinging Bells machines, and had been appropriated by most of the players.

⁴⁹While in the fever mode, any pattern showing one bell is worth twenty times the value of the initial bet. If the pattern has two bells, the payout is thirty times the bet. For three bells it is forty times the bet, and so on. They may pay even more, if the player gets other combinations simultaneously.

⁵⁰Once the player has hit the bells, she cannot change her bet until after the fever mode has been completed.

⁵¹When the bonus is hit, lines of common fruit symbols bring additional credits. The number of credits is contingent on the size of the bet and on the type of fruit in question. The

Another difference between slot machines and Swinging Bells machines is that the latter games offer a variety of specialized play features that are not usually available on slot machines. For example, the "Swinging Bells" game offers players the choice of whether to stop the wheels from spinning instantly by hitting a button or to leaving them to roll out on their own. This is not true of most slot machines, which require players to wait until the machines have finished spinning. The Swinging Bells game also allows players to vary their bets between spins. By contrast, many slot machines require that the player stays with the same bet. If they wish to bet higher or lower amounts, they must switch to a different machine.

Thirdly, all VLTs operate using an electronic bank of credits, rather than the traditional coin payback system. In the Newfoundland case, each credit equals five cents. Thus, when a player puts a five dollar bill into the machine, he receives one hundred credits in his bank. As the player wins and loses, the credits in his bank rise and fall accordingly. While the player has credits in his bank, he may continue playing, without interruption, until his credits have run out. This is quite different from most conventional slot machines, which require players to continually feed coins into the machine after each spin and pay back coins after a win.

It may be that the electronic bank makes it easier for players to lose large sums of money into VLTs. Whereas slot machines continually prompt the player to make a choice between leaving with her money and putting another coin into the machine to play again, VLTs leave it up

lowest is cherries at only one times the value of the bet for each line, while the highest is watermelons at twelve times the value of the bet per line. Thus, someone who hit the bonus with an entire screen of watermelons while betting fifty credits would receive twelve times their bet for all eight lines (three horizontal, three vertical and two diagonal). This would yield a payout of four-thousand, eight-hundred credits (\$240) in addition to the value of the bonus itself. If the value of the bonus was sufficiently high, this type of scenario could conceivably yield a payout which exceeds that obtained from hitting the Swinging Bells.

to the player to decide when to punch out her payment stub and redeem it for cash at the bar. Furthermore, the credit system psychologically separates the player from the value of the amount wagered, because it requires her to perform a calculation in her head in order to determine how much she has won, lost, or wagered. This is not the case with slot machines, where players must regularly handle actual cash.

A fifth difference is that all Swinging Bells machines are connected online to a central headquarters.⁵² This allows the ALC to reprogram the machines, process financial information, and sometimes even repair the machines over the phone line. It also serves to minimize the interactions between the site owner and the lottery corporation, as the corporation is able to extract money from the club's bank account directly, without consultation of any kind.

Finally, Swinging Bells machines tend to be much more accessible than slot machines. While slot machines have traditionally been restricted to casinos, VLTs are often found in establishments which are not specifically gambling venues, such as clubs and restaurants. As a result, players routinely encounter VLTs in situations when they are not (originally) intending to play.

3.3.1.3 'HEGEMONY' AND THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF GAMBLING ON THE BARREN SHORE

By sketching the history of gambling on the Barren Shore, I have endeavoured to show that gambling, in a variety of forms, has a long and uninterrupted tradition in the region. Consequently, the arrival of commercial gambling, in the form of Atlantic Lottery Corporation games in the eighties and nineties has not appeared as a non-synchronous event to the people of

⁵²In Newfoundland, all VLTs are connected to the Atlantic Lottery Corporation headquarters in Moncton, New Brunswick.

the Shore. As a result, changes to Canadian public policy which have made it possible for provincial governments to offer legalized gambling games to their constituents, did not have the same impact on the Shore as they might have in other parts of the country.

The ease with which Atlantic Lottery Corporation games have eclipsed other forms of gambling seems to fit well with Richard Butsch's conception of the way that hegemony operates in the realm of leisure. Butsch borrows heavily from Raymond Williams (1977) in arguing that hegemony is at work whenever "...existing forms of entertainment are colonized by leisure industries that concentrate and centralize production of leisure goods and services and, in turn, restructure leisure activities" (1990: 4). Thus, a practice can be defined as hegemonic "...to the degree that its structure is defined by elites, by centralized social structures, and even by the physical space and objects available for the practice -- relative to being controlled by its practitioners" (Ibid., 8). The degree to which hegemony is governing a given leisure activity "...may be assessed by the degree to which practitioners of leisure are not the producers of their own leisure, the degree to which they are constrained by the conventions of the practice or limited by their access to the means of 'producing' that leisure activity" (Ibid., 8).

Employing Butsch's classificatory scheme, it is clear that VLTs and ALC lottery tickets represent a much more hegemonic form of leisure than most of the forms of gambling that preceded them. Though it may be that most of the equipment required to play cards, bingo, or darts was not locally produced (I did find some evidence to the contrary in the first two cases), each of these games left considerably more control to the practitioners in determining the ways in which this raw equipment was used, than do VLTs or lottery tickets. Though VLTs allow players to choose the size of their bets, and whether or not to stop the wheels from spinning, little of the

basic structure of the game can be manipulated. Secondly, unlike most older games in which players were pitted against human opponents in contests governed by skill or pure luck, ALC games feature pre-determined, and usually unfavourable odds, and no opponents whatsoever. Finally, whereas almost all of the profits garnered from these older games were reinvested directly into the communities where the money was spent, most of the profits from the ALC games are divided between the ALC and the provincial government. Any money that does make it back to the community does so in the form of payments to bar owners, or through provincially, rather than locally controlled policy initiatives.

What is most interesting about the Barren Shore case is the subtlety with which these hegemonic relations have been established. It seems that, for most Shore residents, the arrival of lottery tickets and VLTs appeared as just the next in a long line of changes to the set of gambling opportunities they have had available to them. Many players did not draw a distinction between those games that were operated by the ALC and those that were locally based. Several thought that VLTs were simply owned by the bars that housed them. Some players, who were not aware of the widespread availability of the machines, hypothesized that they had been invented for the specific purpose of exploiting the gambling tendencies of the people of the Barren Shore. One player explained:

All they need to do is put something new to gamble on here and it will be just what we need. It's like the junkies into the heavy duty drugs. If they make one up that's a little stronger or a little better and throw it at the junkies, you know they are going to scoop it up. That's it with the gambling machines. They knew we'd play them.

This comment suggests that, contrary to the popular image of commercialized gambling as a foreign presence inflicted by provincial governments upon the populous, VLTs were regarded by

some Shore residents as something quite familiar, an almost 'natural' fit. The VLT represented a newer, sleeker, and more modern version of a well-established pastime. Thus, rather than providing a basis for resistance against state-operated gambling, the existing cultural context has actually made it easier for the ALC to take control.

3.3.2 THE ROLE PLAYED BY TELEVISION IN PAVING THE WAY FOR THE ACCEPTANCE OF VLTs

Many contemporary ethnographers have shown that collectively held ideas about what is, or is not worthy of consumption can be extremely fluid⁵³ (Miller 1996; Humphrey 1996). What is regarded as the cutting edge of excitement by a group of people in one year may be dismissed as ludicrously dull in the next. This point became quite apparent to me as my research progressed. As I began to inquire about the sorts of activities that people chose to engage in during their spare time, I learned that a number of recreational pursuits which had enjoyed popularity with players in recent years (i.e. church socials, card parties) had given way to new ones (i.e. watching television, socializing at the local club). Even leisure activities within the club had changed significantly in the last decade, as video games, pinball, pool and dart leagues had been largely abandoned, in favour of VLTs. In order to explain the emergence of a climate in which VLTs have risen to prominence as 'the thing to do,' in the minds of many outport residents, it is important to first explore the transformations in the systems of value governing what is considered to be an appropriate, or desirable, use of leisure time.

Barren Shore residents were not strangers to other ways of living prior to the arrival of

⁵³This may be particularly true among groups of people with a greater degree of exposure to the mass media, presenting them with an effectively limitless array of ideas for new forms of recreation (Miller 1996).

television. Decades before Confederation with Canada, economic necessity had forced many people, men in particular, to travel to St. John's, Halifax, Toronto, or New England in search of employment. The information that these voyagers brought back to their homes undoubtedly coloured the ways in which "*strangers*" were perceived. Also, battery powered radios provided people with an additional window onto the outside world. It was not until the late 1960s, however, that televisions began to make inroads into Barren Shore communities, forever altering the nature of social life (Student Essays).

Part of the reason for the almost unchallenged popularity of TV may be that the level of literacy attained by most Barren Shore residents is very poor, especially among older people. It is safe to assume that prior to the 1960s, when television was first introduced, it was considerably worse. Very few people completed high school, probably because economic necessity forced them to pursue employment instead. As a consequence, few people turned to reading as a pastime. A second factor in explaining the lack of interest in written materials is that they did not fit with the tradition of group-oriented recreational activities. I noticed that reading was still viewed as an anti-social activity by some people. Television, like radio before it, seems to have offered a much more appealing alternative, probably because it was so easily assimilable into the oral tradition. At least in the early years, watching television did not require people to withdraw from the social group in order to be entertained.

The situation on the Barren Shore seems to closely parallel that described by Conrad Phillip Kottak in his groundbreaking study of the initial appearance of television in four predominately

non-literate communities in rural Brazil.⁵⁴ Kottack challenges the frequently posited argument that television represents a necessarily individuating force in all social contexts. He states: "...in a culture where people like to be alone, TV may contribute to greater isolation. However, in one where people like to be with others, it may lead to greater social interaction" (1990: 148). Indeed, Kottack found that when TV was initially introduced to most rural Brazilian communities, it actually stimulated social contact. He found that in situations where televisions were not common in all homes, set ownership and hours of operation correlated strongly with the number of household visitors. It was only when the vast majority of homes had purchased TVs that people became more apt to stay home to watch their own sets (Ibid., 146).

Kottak's observations seem to relate well to the reception of television in outport Newfoundland. When TVs were first introduced in the late 1960s, they were quickly incorporated into the tradition of gathering in homes. Although the visual reception was often extremely poor, large congregations would gather, almost religiously, on Wednesday and Saturday nights to watch Hockey Night in Canada (Nemec 1999a). Similarly, many would gather to watch daily soap operas, or would at least devote a portion of each day to discussing them. As with Kottak's Brazilian case, however, later years have seen the proliferation of TV sets into most homes and

⁵⁴Though further research is needed into the nature of the initial reception of television in rural Newfoundland, the insights that I garnered from my research suggest that Kottak's work provides a valuable blueprint for such an endeavour. This exploratory discussion relies heavily on his work.

watching them has gradually evolved into a less social pursuit.⁵⁵ ⁵⁶ This effect was well understood by many people in the community. Several people, including heavy television watchers, were openly disdainful of the isolating effects that TVs had delivered upon their communities.⁵⁷ One woman, bemoaning the consequences of television and other electronic media, explained:

Our communities aren't near as sociable as they used to be. Like people used to go over to each other's houses each and every night. Now hardly anybody communicates. Not like they used to.

Clubs and VLTs were presented by a few players as one of the only vestiges of the more social era of visiting. Some players spoke of clubs and TVs as their only two leisure options. When they could no longer stand to watch TV, they would go to the club for a change of pace.

When I was laid off, I found that I had to sit around at home all day watching TV. I guess I started gambling to get me out of the house and cure me of my boredom.

I guess when people get sick of TV, that's what they do...Sometimes I try to watch TV instead but that doesn't always work.

It is impossible to fully gauge the impact that exposure to television had on Barren Shore residents. The extent to which it has transformed the lives of individuals has undoubtedly depended on variety of factors, such as their degree of prior exposure to the outside world, the amount of time they have spent watching television, and the content of the programming they have

⁵⁵Observations about the detrimental effects of television on the custom of social visiting in Newfoundland have been made by Nemec (1999c), and others.

⁵⁶Though the tradition of gathering to watch television has subsided in recent years, it continues to be kept alive by many households. In the 1990s, the practice of gathering with family and friends to watch TV bingo has gained enormous popularity.

⁵⁷Another target of blame for the decline in the prevalence of social visiting was the telephone. Though most people saw value in this technology, many of those that were old enough to remember its inception argued that it too had reduced the extent to which people would gather in homes to exchange information.

seen. What is clear is that almost overnight, a flood of new images of alternate ways of living seeped into the consciousness of people on the Shore. This trend has been intensified by the addition of cable television and VCRs in subsequent decades.

Perhaps the most apparent effect of these television images in outport Newfoundland was that they exposed people to images of wealth that had never before been imaginable to them. The world of expensive homes, cars, and other possessions became an instant reality. Also, television advertising showcased a host of new commodities and spoke of the joys to be brought from their ownership. These factors, above all else, created an immediate increase in the value placed on consumerism. The result, was a turn toward conspicuous consumption that was unparalleled in previous generations (Student Essays). The power of television programs and advertising to create wants is well summarized by Arjun Appadurai, who argues that demand for new commodities often emerges as "...a mechanical response to social manipulation" rather than "a mysterious emanation of human needs" (1986: 29). That the rise of television on the Shore has been contemporaneous with the construction of fully modern shopping malls and the subsequent influx of multinational corporations, has only contributed to this process.

Clubs and VLTs appear to have benefited greatly from the presence of television. Exposure to foreign images has reshaped local notions about what constitutes an appropriate way to spend one's 'leisure time' and one's money. Television introduced people to urban social settings such as theatres, golf courses, ski resorts, and, of course, bars. Increasingly, leisure came to be synonymous with entertainment. In order to have a "*good time*," it was expected that a person would leave her home and spend money. The lack of local entertainment establishments did not allow people many chances to experience these activities first hand, however. The

placement of VLTs into clubs in the early nineties provided a perfect opportunity for people to indulge their consumption fantasies.

3.3.3 VLTs AS A BRIDGE BETWEEN WORLDS

VLTs have the tremendous advantage of being located within clubs, the social centres of many outport communities. They have inherited the tradition of pool tables, darts, and video games as the latest type of 'modern' entertainment to descend upon the local club scene. Many area residents perceived of VLTs as simply the next in the long line of new activities which have inundated local clubs in the last twenty-five years. The importance of being the newest form of commercialized entertainment should not be understated. This point is evident in these passages from three heavy players.

It's just that people like to have something new. Something else will probably come along to replace these games next year.

Whatever was the trend for the day, I had to have my share of it.

I think it's a good thing that we got them. I think that we should be allowed to have the same things as everyone else.

These comments support Chris Rojek's (1985) argument that people's choices of leisure activities are often dictated by the exogenous forces of capitalism, which structure the range of opportunities that they have available to them.

What separates VLTs from previous temptations is that they represent a kind of link between past and present. The machines occupy a privileged position within the new economy of leisure on the Barren Shore. They provide a bridge between entrenched leisure practices and the new values promoted by television and other media. VLTs offer an unparalleled opportunity for people to reify community and togetherness and to celebrate the gambling heritage of the region,

while simultaneously embracing the new world of media inspired consumption.

Chapter Four

EASY COME, EASY GO: CONSUMPTION, IDENTITY AND THE MANY MEANINGS OF MONEY

This chapter examines some of the behavioural characteristics of the community of heavy Gamblers. While most of these players said that their desire to win money was among the most important motivations for playing VLTs, very few of those that did win regularly left the club with their money. It was much more common for most or all of the winnings to be disposed of while at the club, through further gambling, lending money to others, or purchasing alcohol and other disposable gratifications. Though some of the Gamblers would occasionally leave the club without spending their winnings, in situations of particular want or need, this behaviour tended to be regarded as greedy and was quietly condemned by other members of the group. It appears that, above all else, it was the willingness to spend winnings freely that defined the group's sense of collective identity.

The value on unbridled consumption that was adhered to by the Gamblers seems to have been nurtured in the period of optimism and relative prosperity that accompanied the onset of the TAGS program in 1994. When my field research began in 1998, this optimism was becoming less prevalent, however. The termination of compensation payments for most recipients on the Barren Shore between 1997 and 1999 meant that several of the Gamblers had suffered, or were anticipating major declines in their incomes. Even those who had not been compensated by the program were forced to brace themselves for an unclear economic future. Nevertheless, most Gamblers continued to uphold the free-spending ethic.

4.1 PLAYING FOR MONEY: THE PURSUIT OF ECONOMIC PROFIT AS A MOTIVATION FOR GAMBLING

There is a long sociological tradition of viewing gambling as a means by which people from lower economic classes seek to attain upward social mobility (Caillois 1962; Tec 1964; Devereaux 1980). For the most part, these theories have built upon Robert Merton's 'Strain Theory,' viewing gambling as a form of social deviance. Merton (1938) argued that social deviance arises from a non-alignment of cultural goals and structural conditions. Capitalist societies place a strong value on material success but deny many people of the socially legitimate means to attain it. Thus, some people pursue illegitimate means instead. Though wagering on games of chance ceases to carry the deviant stigma it once did, it continues to represent an unconventional way in which individuals may pursue prosperity without following more legitimate means, such as inheritance or hard work and self-denial.

Certain forms of gambling, such as sweepstakes-style lotteries, race track betting, or the stock market appear to lend themselves nicely to Merton's model, because these games offer the possibility, however remote, for players to win enormous sums of money in relatively short periods of time. Strain Theory is of less value in explaining the popularity of VLT gambling, however, which features comparatively small payouts. Only nine of the twenty-five regular gamblers interviewed had seen anyone amass daily winnings totalling more than one thousand dollars. Even those who had recognized that wins of this size were extremely rare.⁵⁸ Though the desire to win money was cited as an important motivating force by many of the players, it did not appear that

⁵⁸The largest one day win that anyone claimed to have witnessed was two thousand, seven hundred dollars. This was won by one of the Gamblers' cousins in the regional centre. Only four people claimed to have seen daily winnings higher than one thousand dollars in the clubs on the Barren Shore.

any of them expected to make their fortunes through it.

The only possible exceptions to this rule were two men who sought to maximize the value of their wins by routinely betting the maximum of fifty credits (\$2.50) per spin. These players would also sometimes travel to busier establishments in larger centres to play the machines.⁵⁹ While neither said that they expected to get rich playing the machines, both said that they would prefer that there was no ceiling on the amount that players were allowed to bet, so that the machines could be used to this end.

It was also very unusual to find experienced players who thought that they could win consistently on the machines. A strong inverse relationship was apparent between the frequency of a person's play and the importance he placed on economic profit as a primary reason for playing. The expectation of long run success seemed to be far more common among players who were less familiar with the machines. Inexperienced gamblers were also more likely to say that they were motivated by the desire to "*make money*," and most believed this to be the primary motivation of most other players as well. Most people in the core group of Gamblers dismissed these aspirations as naivete, characteristic only of novice players. One of the Gamblers attempted to describe the behaviour of most of the new players that he had seen:

I've seen a hell of a lot of people who are just starting out that think they can make a living at it. They're after winning two or three hundred dollars, and they think they can do it every day. Why would you go to work when you can just play the slot machine. But that's just not the way it works. They're going to lose in the long run.

Several of the more regular players admitted that when they initially began to play VLTs, they were far more optimistic about their chances of coming out ahead. Three separate players used the

⁵⁹This latter motive is based on the belief that the machines that are played the most are also the most likely to pay out large sums of money.

phrase “easy money” to describe their initial attraction to the machines. A number of Gamblers, particularly those who had enjoyed early success, said that they had initially thought of using the machines as a way of supplementing their incomes. One woman explained:

My first reason was the money. At first, if I could go in with a dollar and haul out five dollars it was just totally incredible for me. I was used to working. When you're working for minimum wage, you appreciate a dollar earned. To me, putting a dollar in the machine and hauling out five dollars was earning four dollars.

For the most part, however, long term losses had persuaded most of the regulars that consistent profits were not a likely possibility, and they had grown to appreciate other aspects of play instead.

4.2 PLAYING WITH MONEY: THE ROLE OF CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

While players of every degree of involvement said that the possibility of winning money was one of their main reasons for playing VLTs, those in the group of Gamblers had developed a unique set of spending rituals, which rarely allowed any of them to leave the club with their winnings in hand. In fact, it was very unlikely for these players to leave the club with any money whatsoever. All of the five local bartenders estimated that less than two out of every ten players left the bar with money in their pockets.⁶⁰ Similarly, most interviewees said that their most common reason for stopping was the exhaustion of all of their money. The impoverishing rituals adhered to by the group of Gamblers can be broken down into three broad categories: progressive betting and risk taking, spending sprees, and lending or giving away money.

4.2.1 PROGRESSIVE BETTING AND RISK TAKING

Many of the Gamblers believed that the best way to play VLTs was to begin with a relatively small bet and increase it gradually, as they accumulated more credits. Often, they would

⁶⁰ Four of the five bartenders thought the figure was closer to one in ten.

oscillate between two or three different bets over the course of a playing session. Usually, a Gambler's decision to raise her bet was stimulated by the urging of her fellows. When a player built up credits to a certain level, usually five hundred (\$25) or more, she was often encouraged to put her bet up higher and "go in for the kill." Often, players encouraged each other to bet the maximum of fifty credits (\$2.50) per spin in these situations, in the hopes that they would hit the swinging bells and receive a large sum of money. Though betting fifty occasionally resulted in these enormous wins, it also had the potential to use up credits very quickly, and, more often than not, it reduced the players bank to nothing in a matter of minutes.

On rare occasions, several Gamblers would all agree to bet fifty credits at the same time, and would compete to see who could maintain this bet for the longest period of time. Many of the heaviest spenders seemed to take pride in their willingness to bet, and often lose, large sums of money without showing signs of panic. One of the heaviest players commented:

If there 's one thing that defines our group its being willing to spend money. You have to show no concern for money, even though you 're probably freaking inside. I know with the set that I hang out with, we are always trying to outdo each other. It used to be how much we could win, now it's how much we can lose. Everybody gathers around the machine just to watch you. It's like it's expected for you to keep up the pace. We're the big guys. We're expected to go in and gamble heavily and lose heavily, and we don't ever want to disappoint anybody.

These displays seem to support Erving Goffman's (1967) argument that gambling provides an opportunity for players to display their strength of character by engaging in fateful decision-making while in the presence of their peers.⁶¹

Betting high was also a means by which the group of Gamblers laid claim to the machines

⁶¹Other theorists who have emphasized the social rewards of heavy gambling include Zola (1963); Herman (1967); Hayano (1982); Martinez (1983); and Rosencrance (1988).

and the space around them. Many of the regulars expressed disdain toward people who bet low amounts, especially when there were others waiting to play. Sometimes these feelings were expressed overtly. It was not uncommon for certain heavy players to make comments, such as, “*Why are you only betting eight?*” or “*Why don’t you make it worth your while?*” when they felt that someone wasn’t betting high enough. By raising their bets and putting pressure on others to do the same, the Gamblers urged people who could not keep up the pace to surrender their machines to those who could.

Another way in which Gamblers regularly took risks was by encouraging each other to “*push their luck*” and “*let their winnings ride*,” instead of punching out their pay slips.⁶² The taboo against punching out was particularly applied to small denominations of money. Many Gamblers held the belief that anything under forty or fifty dollars was not worth punching out. One woman described the way in which this pressure from her peers often motivated her to gamble away her winnings.

Sometimes I get my credits up, or down, to twenty dollars and I want to punch out so bad, but two machines down you hear, ‘What a wuss you are. Leave it in there. See if you can build it up.’ And I end up leaving it alone.

Not surprisingly, letting one’s winnings ride usually resulted in a loss of whatever credits had been amassed. Some Gamblers had grown so used to spending all of their winnings back into the machines that they would often use up their remaining credits deliberately before leaving. When they were forced to leave abruptly, it was quite common for these players to raise their bets in an effort to spend whatever credits were left in the machine, instead of taking the time to exchange

⁶²This point was also raised by Hayano who observed that professional poker players are particularly judgmental of those who “hit and run.” By this he means, those who leave the establishment immediately after a big win (Hayano 1982: 95).

them for cash.

The social pressure to go for more was often intensified by the tendency of some players to “*buddy up*” (play together) on one machine.⁶³ In these situations, a decision to punch out one’s ticket had to be reached by the consensus of all involved parties. Several of the Gamblers said that when they were playing with “*a buddy*,” they were more apt to bet higher and take risks that they would not be willing to take if they were playing alone. One player said that she was likely to spend more when playing with others because she felt like they were “*in it together*,” and she didn’t want to be seen as trying to back out of the partnership. Although playing in groups was attractive to many of the Gamblers because it allowed them to split their losses with another person, most said that in practice, they usually found themselves betting higher and staying longer when they were playing with another person. Thus, they usually ended up spending just as much as they would have if they were playing alone.

4.2.2 SPENDING SPREES

A longstanding tradition among the Gamblers was for those who hit the swinging bells to buy a round for the house. This was even true in situations where the cost of the round exceeded the value of the win, and in situations where the player had already spent more than the value of the win into the machine. Although the importance of the custom was rarely spoken of overtly, the buying of rounds was one of the most essential distinctions between occasional players and those who were included in the fellowship of Gamblers. When asked about what would happen when someone in the group of Gamblers didn’t buy the round, one regular replied:

⁶³Sometimes as many as three players would buddy up together on one machine, but it was much more common for people to play in pairs. In these situations, players would often use the term ‘double up’ instead.

Oh my god, you're talked about. You're shunned. We hate the ones who take our charity but don't give back. And people around here have long memories. I know of one woman who did that and she's still talked about a year later. Like if you don't buy that round, and you win big, and you just pocket that money and go... Oh man, you're mean, you're tight. They (the Gamblers) will tear somebody right edown for doing that. That person might have lost five hundred dollars over the run of the week and just won two hundred and wants to go home with it and just say fuck it... That is just not taken into consideration. They have no sympathy.

Most Gamblers could readily name the few heavy players who had not bought a round after a big win, but had taken advantage of the generosity of others. Some continued to harbour disdain for these persons long after the fact.

I always buy the round. Even when I've spent more than I've won. I'm not like those greedy ones, who only think about themselves.

By the time I began my fieldwork, the practice of buying rounds had been modified slightly. Though regulars continued to buy for each other, the practice of buying for the entire club had fallen out of fashion. This was because it had become clear that some people, who never played the machines, were hanging around the club when they knew that the regulars would be there, in the hopes of getting free drinks. Thus, it was widely agreed that only those people that might one day reciprocate deserved to be included.

The generosity of big winners often extended beyond the initial round of drinks as well. Often Gamblers would tuck a small amount of their winnings in their pocket, to cover what they had spent, and would devote the rest of their spoils to buying drinks, fast food, or any number of other luxuries for themselves, and usually for several of their cohorts as well. This lavish spending was especially common on days when at least one of the Gamblers had enjoyed an unusually successful session.

The greatest celebrations took place on days when several of the Gamblers received big

wins. Some players suggested that these evenings of massive group spending were fairly common, because the machines tended to pay in sequence. Some players observed that it was fairly common for all of the machines to pay the bells on some nights, and for none of them to do so on other nights. It is likely not a coincidence that these unusually fortuitous outings tended to correspond with days on which many people had received paychecks, because it was on these days that the highest volume of money was being spent into the machines.

Some players said that spending money on their friends gave them a special sense of satisfaction, either because it gave them the opportunity to bring happiness to others, or because of the sense of celebrity it brought them. One man said that he had always dreamed of hitting the bells while betting fifty on a busy night, so that he could afford to treat everyone in the club to a few rounds. Others said that they liked spending money on others because it made them happy that they had not been so greedy as to spend all of their winnings back into the machine. Most of these players said that they knew that they would end up spending the money anyway. By spending it on others, they could at least ensure that they would get something tangible out of their investment. One heavy player described his idea of a successful day at the club:

Sometimes, someone will say OK now, lets go and get a feed and some beer and get out of here. Usually you feel good about that because at least you got something out of your night. The worst is when it just goes right back into the machine and you have nothing to show for it.

A few of the Gamblers said that they would occasionally play the machines when they wanted to go out for a night of drinking, but didn't have enough money. If they, or one of their friends, were lucky enough to hit the bells on a high bet, they would all get their drinks paid for.

4.2.3 LENDING AND GIVING AWAY MONEY

Most regular players exchanged money quite freely while in the club. In addition to buying each other drinks, it was quite common for a more successful player to lend money to a less successful partner once he had exhausted his stake. The size of these loans could be anywhere from an additional five or ten dollars to a thousand dollars or more. Often smaller scale lending was quite fluid. It seemed to be generally accepted that one day the shoe would be on the other foot and the loan would be repaid. One player explained the etiquette surrounding lending of this nature.

We have a code of ethics between ourselves. Take the lending of money thing, for example. You don't have to pay back the loan for six months, but as long as you pay it back eventually it's OK. Even if you explain your circumstances and say that you may not be able to pay it back for a while, but make it clear that you haven't forgotten, it's OK. It's those that try to skip out on loans that are really shunned.

If a player consistently failed to pay back loans, they eventually developed a bad reputation in the group and, in the long run, had a difficult time finding people who would be willing to lend to them. This informal system ensured that no one person consistently profited at the expense of others.

Despite the existence of these sanctions, some players still preferred to make an arrangement for the loan to be repaid at a specific time. This latter form of lending was particularly common with larger scale loans, or in situations where players had different paydays. In some cases, lending occurred between shift-mates, who knew that they would be repaid on the next payday.

Usually repayment took the form of gambling funds, but it was not uncommon for it to be paid in the form of gifts. Those persons who had been short on money for an extended period of

time would sometimes take advantage of big wins to make up for the funds they borrowed from other players. Usually, this involved treating them to several rounds of drinks, or to cigarettes at timely moments.

Some players made a practice of simply giving money to others when they had won a large amount. These donations were generally made with no immediate expectation of being paid back. In some cases, the offering of money was an effort to persuade a playing buddy to stay longer, but often players would give money away with no apparent goal in mind. Some would even give money to those that they didn't know very well. On occasions where several regulars had won large sums, it was not uncommon for so much cash to be floating around the machines that it became impossible to keep track of who owned what. One of the Gamblers explained his carefree philosophy about sharing money with others.

I hit the bells last night and the first thing I did was loan out some money, because a few of my good friends had no money to play. It's only bell money so who cares if I get it back. I'm after making millions...and spending millions too.

The bravado expressed in this comment suggests that the man derived a sense of elevated status from his generosity. Another frequent doner would routinely get all of her winnings in five dollar bills. She would then place them on her machine and allow her friends to draw freely from the pile. This practice was eventually adopted by a few of the other Gamblers as well. Two said that they believed that their willingness to part with their money was the source of their good luck.

4.3 EXPLANATIONS FOR BINGE SPENDING

4.3.1 RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE

Several ethnographers have commented on the historic importance of generalized reciprocity in Newfoundland outport societies (Chiaramonte 1970; Wadel 1973). It seems as

though a similar system of exchange was at work among the heaviest gamblers. Those Gamblers that found themselves in comfortable financial situations, whether because of the receipt of a large paycheck or a big win on the machines would distribute money quite freely while at the bar by lending or giving away money, and distributing gifts. This generosity was often quite indiscriminate, extending to all of the players that were in the bar at the time. It was simply expected that most of the core group would be around to share in the celebration. Those that did not show up for the spending spree may have been missed, but were seldom waited for.⁶⁴ The Gamblers engaged in this charitable behaviour with the recognition that at some later point, when they found themselves in need, they would be benefit from the same communal ethic.

It should be noted that the tradition of sharing money liberally in outport clubs likely predated the arrival of VLTs. This point is substantiated by one undergraduate essay written by a Memorial University student from the Barren Shore in the early 1980s. The author describes the tradition among plant workers of going to the club on their paydays to break their checks and buy drinks for one another (Student Essays). The paucity of academic research into the history of club subcultures in Newfoundland outports makes it difficult to know which elements of the current traditions were in place at that time, however.

The form of reciprocity apparent in the clubs seems to correspond well with what Christopher Hauch (1995) has called “binge spending.” Hauch’s ethnography of a community of regular bar goers in the poorest sections of Winnipeg showed that acts of immense generosity between these men were extremely common. This was even true among people who barely knew

⁶⁴On some occasions, players that had just come into a large windfall would call some of their friends to come to the bar and share in the wealth, but this was not a very common practice.

each other. In describing the usual behaviour of someone who had just come into a considerable sum of money, such as a welfare check, Hauch writes:

Coming into a large sum, the recipient commenced a swift and indiscriminate distribution. As quickly as possible, he purchased food, liquor, and gifts of myriad description, showing no preference for binge participants, but donating randomly to anyone who happened by (1995: 301).

Hauch argues that under social conditions that forbid the accumulation of surplus, "one is better off to share in the remote hope of accumulating social credits for use at a time when the roles will be reversed" (Ibid., 300). Though the value placed on reciprocity accounts for some of the extravagant spending behaviour displayed by the Gamblers, there is still a need to explain why this tradition came about, and why it persists, in spite of a wide array of other possible uses for the money.

4.3.2 ECONOMIC SECURITY: THE IMPACT OF TAGS

The development of the free-spending customs of the group of Gamblers may be partially explainable by the unique set of historical circumstances that surrounded the onset of the moratorium. Interviews with local people indicated that whatever collective spending patterns had already been established in clubs before the moratorium were accelerated with the onset of the TAGS program. This is likely due to the fact that the program represented the first chance that many local people had ever had, to experience a period of prolonged economic prosperity. Prior to NCARP and TAGS, the lives of fishery workers on the Barren Shore had never been characterized by fixed annual incomes. Instead, a boom and bust cycle had developed, in which the consumption levels of most families rose and fell in accordance with income levels. Most fishers had grown accustomed to receiving a series of large payments during the fishing season,

and considerably lower EI payments in the winter. Plant workers, by contrast, tended to make the majority of their income from EI in the winter, but had to prepare for long stretches without any income during the fishing season, because they had no way of predicting when or how often they would be called into work. Both groups suffered in poor fishing seasons, when they were forced to adapt to considerably lower incomes.

Some of the ethnography from the early years of the TAGS program suggests that the initial reaction to the closure of the fishery among compensated fishery workers was one of optimism (Woodrow 1996). Compensation packages provided many households with more cash than they had ever had before. Furthermore, TAGS recipients found themselves liberated from the need to work for their money. For many people, the result was a turn toward unbridled consumption. As money began to come in, some recipients decided to take advantage of the situation by purchasing new vehicles, renovating their homes, or buying a variety of other items for themselves or their families. As Woodrow reported of the scene in the Bonavista area in 1994: "The short term effect is a positive one for the community; there is money and people are spending it" (1996: 178). A very similar situation appears to have been at work on the Barren Shore. Many people spoke about the decadent spending patterns of many of the TAGS recipients living in the region. One man, who had not been involved in the fishery remarked:

You should have seen it, b'y. It seemed like overnight, all the fishermen had these shiny new trucks, you know. They'd been driving the same old rust buckets around for the last fifteen years, but now they thought they'd hit the big time. It was like they'd won the lottery or something. People started blowing money on all kinds of things that they never would have before. They all knew they were gonna be taken care of for five years, so what did they have to lose.

The freedom with which many people spent their compensation money in the early years of

the TAGS program seems to suggest that these persons were not initially fearful about the economic futures of their communities. This point is echoed by Woodrow's survey of fishers and plant workers on the Bonavista Peninsula. She found that 86 percent of respondents (43/50) felt that the cod would return to their old numbers. Of those that did, 60 percent (26/43) felt that all the stocks needed was time (Ibid., 187). This finding is supported by Peter Sinclair et al., who did research in the same area. He quotes one outport resident as saying: "You've got a lot of people figuring now it's all going to come back. They figures it (the fishery) is all going to open up, and everything else" (Sinclair et al.: 9). This data suggests that some fishers interpreted compensation payments as efforts to hold them over until the fishery reopened, rather than a sign of the eminent demise of the industry, or a stimulus to move them into other lines of work.

This 'wait and see' attitude was bolstered by the fact that, for those with a heavy stake in the industry, TAGS promised a steady income for several years. The program had originally promised that thirty-three percent of the recipients in the Barren Shore region would be compensated until 1998, and another forty-five percent would be compensated until 1999.⁶⁵ Thus, almost four out of every five recipients living on the Shore (78%) were expecting to be covered for at least four years (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Finance, Economics and Statistics Branch 1997). For these persons, a decision to look for an alternate line of work was not immediately necessary.

The consumption ethic forged during this period goes some distance toward explaining the

⁶⁵Eventually, TAGS was brought to a close when in 1998 when its budget was exhausted a year prior to its initially scheduled termination date. Later that year, some of the people who did not receive their full compensation were granted further lump-sum payments by the post-TAGS program.

initial development of the custom of heavy spending on VLTs. Since the machines first arrived in the area within a year of the declaration of the moratorium, they were a popular choice of activity among displaced fishery workers, many of whom were feeling liberated of economic constraints for the first time in their lives. VLTs offered an opportunity to experiment with this new disposable income and test the boundaries of their new social position.

4.3.3 SYMBOLIC PROTEST

The heavy spending of many Barren Shore residents may also be partially explainable by the work of Edward Devereaux (1980[1949]), who claimed that free-spending that characterizes most forms of gambling is appealing because it represents a symbolic protest against the budgetary constraints, rationality and ethics constituent of investment capitalism. Because the protest is only symbolic, he argued, gambling is functional for capitalist societies. It serves as a kind of safety valve, which diverts economic frustrations away from the dominant institutions.

Building upon Devereaux's initial work, Apt, Smith, and Christiansen have argued that gambling offers the opportunity for players to participate in an "atmosphere of self-indulgence." It replaces the "ethic of saving, of self-denial and capital accumulation" with an "ideology of hedonistic consumerism" (1985: 22). This opportunity may be particularly valued by people who do not expect that any amount of hard work will assure them of a lifetime of economic security.⁶⁶

Both of these perspectives share the view that a major part of the appeal of gambling is that it allows for persons who are at the mercy of social and economic forces beyond their control, to pretend that these external forces are not important. While engaged in the act of gambling, players

⁶⁶This social significance of the frivolous consumption that has characterized the leisure pursuits of the French working class is explored in detail by Pierre Bourdieu (1984[1979]) in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*.

are able, if only for a few fleeting hours, to cast off the shackles of economic necessity and live in the moment.

A more optimistic rendering of this type of behaviour is offered by Evthymios Papataxiarchis (1999) in his ethnographic study of coffee house gambling in an economically marginalised rural community on the Greek island of Lesbos. Whereas Devereaux and Apt et al. emphasize the futility of the protest that gambling represents, Papataxiarchis suggests that, in some cases, gambling can be understood as an “...act of constructive resistance...to market and state domination...” (1999: 158-9).

The economy of the region he studied is almost solely dependent on the international market for olive oil. In turn, it's residents have grown accustomed to having very little control over the economic and political forces that govern their lives. Reckless disposal of money through gambling, he argues, is an effort to defy this relationship of subordination. He contends that, at the community level, the gambler “represents the man who ‘takes his destiny in his hands,’ ...The gambler holds a ‘total agency’,... one that is not subjected to money; on the contrary he makes money move around” (Ibid., 167-8). By adopting a more “offensive strategy” toward the disposal of money, the gambler symbolically transforms “...economic dependence...into personal autonomy” (Ibid., 171).

Papataxiarchis also observed that most of the gamblers he studied expressed intense disdain toward money. To them, it represented “...a spirit that appears to upset the correct order of things” (Ibid., 164). They believed that money existed external to the true self, and had the power to enslave people to the values of “selfishness, competitiveness, and divisiveness” (Ibid., 164). By adopting a spendthrift attitude with each other and working together to “destroy money,” gamblers

could subvert these values and conserve an “egalitarian, universalistic, and joyful image of manhood” (Ibid., 168-170). In this way, gambling comes to be a way of affirming the local, a way privileging interpersonal relationships over economic dependencies.

The events described by Papataxiarchis bear a strong resonance with the situation in rural Newfoundland. The Barren Shore consists of a number of communities which have been greatly influenced by exogenous political decisions. Also, because of the region’s extensive dependence on the cod fishery, external market variability has held tremendous sway in dictating the conditions of social life. Many Barren Shore residents expressed frustration over the limited control that they have had over the decisions that have shaped their lives.⁶⁷ Spending their money on gambling may be one way in which some people have sought to retain a sense of autonomy and self-governance.

This motivation appears to have taken on a particular significance during the moratorium period. The TAGS program was clearly designed to encourage people to move away from the fishery, if not away from the Barren Shore altogether. By spending TAGS money in a communal fashion, Gamblers expressed their commitment to their home communities and to each other. Payments designed to provide incentives for people to abandon their attachments to their communities were redefined in such a way as to strengthen social ties, regardless of the economic consequences of doing so. In this way, players expressed their resistance to further government efforts to restructure their lives. The widespread belief that the government was to blame for causing the collapse of the fishery only added strength to this commitment.

⁶⁷This mentality is described in more detail in Chapter Eleven.

4.3.4 BELONGING

A further incentive to join the community of heavy gamblers was that doing so helped people to adjust to the changes that accompanied the moratorium period. Despite the efforts of some players to resist the government strategy for managing with the fishery crisis, the declaration of the moratorium did force most Barren Shore residents to make major life adjustments in order to adapt to the new situation. This adaptation process became even more important as the compensation programs neared their end, and people were left to face an uncertain future. When my research began in 1998, most of those that did receive compensation continued to spend money freely on VLTs, even though many of these persons had already had their TAGS payments cut off, or were anticipating the end of payments in the very near future.

For many players, the greatest push toward involvement in the heavy spending community was the need for a new sense of belonging, when previous affiliations ceased to carry the same meaning. Most interviewees expressed the belief that, with no other industries for people to fall back on, the local economy would go as the fishery went. Although the Shore had experienced a steady stream of major social and economic changes since Confederation, some form of cod fishery had remained a constant throughout. Beyond the tremendous economic importance of the cod fish, it has also come to have a tremendous symbolic value in defining the collective identity of Barren Shore residents and, one might argue, in defining the collective identity of Newfoundlanders generally. While not all Shore residents were employed directly in the fishery, the importance of the industry to the economic and social fabric of the community was unquestionable. As Woodrow observed of the sentiment in the Bonavista area in 1994 “...traditionally the community defines itself in relation to the resource base, the disappearance of the

resource base forces a new definition" (1996: 33).

Most Barren Shore residents were affected by the fishery closure in additional ways as well. Increasingly, the region began to take on a transitional character, as many local people were forced to come to terms with the emigration of friends and family members. Also, whether or not it was directly related to the fishery closure, many people in the region had been recently thrust into states of unemployment. Some players experienced a similar sense of dislocation for other reasons. Many had gone through recent separations or divorces, which forced them to look for new ways of defining themselves. Others had recently experienced the death of a loved one or spouse that they were particularly close to.

Participation in the group of Gamblers helped many of these people to recapture a sense of belonging and self-worth. In exchange for the economic cost of *"gambling with the big spenders,"* players got a chance to feel a part of something larger than themselves. They found a network of close friends with whom to discuss matters that were of concern to them and a sense of identity and notoriety in the community as a whole. These resources were of particular value as feelings of uncertainty about the economic and social future of the region grew stronger, leaving previous definitions of self ever more in doubt.

4.3.4.1 CONTINUITY AND COMMUNITAS

One of the most immediate social rewards of being a Gambler was that it provided an opportunity to forge a new sense of community in place of the previous one, which had been lost or damaged by economic and/or social upheaval. The club provided a place in which players could meet up with other people who were experiencing similarly turbulent situations. This point was also made by Cato Wadel (1973). Wadel argued that when his protagonist George became

unemployed and had to go on welfare, he needed to forge ties with other welfare recipients, because they gave him an opportunity to discuss issues related to their common life situations, such as the day to day experience of unemployment, and changes to government welfare legislation. The added difficulty experienced by George was that he had to downplay the importance of these relationships in his conversations with his employed friends, for fear that he would be branded as a part of the “lazy” welfare community.

Those put out of work during the moratorium did not share George’s problem. Whereas George was put out of work because he was no longer physically employable within the logging industry, those left jobless by the moratorium were unemployed as a result of federal economic restructuring programs, which most agreed were outside of their control. As a result, these persons did not experience the same social restrictions as Wadel’s welfare recipients, and were free to interact with each other.

As a result of their shared sense of victimization, some TAGS recipients spoke of a feeling of solidarity that had developed between them. This sense of solidarity was strengthened by the fact that all of these persons had decided not to move away from the Shore, but rather to wait out the moratorium in the hopes that better times would soon come their way. Like George, however, some of the people left unemployed by the moratorium felt a need to get together with others who were experiencing similar situations. Gambling on VLTs at the club provided such an opportunity. The community of Gamblers served as an outlet through which players could express their frustrations with the boredom brought by unemployment, and talk openly about their concerns about the future of the fishery and of their communities. As the prospect of a full recovery of the cod fishery grew dimmer, and compensation payments neared their end, this comradery became

even more important. As one displaced fisher commented:

It's troubled times in the Maritimes and I think they're going to get worse. Six months down the road, it could be twice as bad. So you've got to have something to drift away into. Playing the games helps because at least it gives you the chance to kick back and relax and talk to other people who are going through the same type of thing.

The appeal of the club was aided by the fact that it provided a sense of continuity for many players. Persons in their thirties and forties, the primary clientele of both the club and the VLTs, had grown up in the late 1970s and 1980s. In this era, clubs were reaping the benefits of the economic boom brought by the expansion of the offshore fishery. This generation had patronized the clubs regularly in this period, and many had continued to visit them throughout most of their adult lives. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that when many of these people were left with a great deal of time to fill, clubs assumed an even greater importance for them. One woman who was also a heavy gambler commented:

I think that a great sense of depression fell on all the communities around here because a traditional way of life that had gone on for centuries was taken away. There was nothing left to be proud of. There is no continuity now. We absolutely do not know what is coming next. Nothing is in our control anymore. This is a way to keep some continuity, with the clubs and the gambling. It is connected because it is the only way to hang onto something we have lived with all our lives, and risk is the number one factor. All we live by is risk. Most people will take whatever they can get and blow it on whatever everybody else is doing because it's the only thing that's constant. The drinking and the socializing associated with drinking has always been important here, and if the VLT is there and that seems to be gathering a crowd, people will go for it.

By going to the club, players had a chance to embrace something that seemed familiar at a time when many other aspects of their lives were resting on shifting ground. It offered a place where players could go to feel at home, and to discharge feelings of anxiety by talking to others who were struggling with many of the same problems. Ironically, the uncertainty of the gambling itself

came to serve as an apt metaphor for the uncertainty that characterized the lives of many regular players.

The sense of shared identity that was fostered by this collective experience of uncertainty could be described as “*communitas*.” The term was first coined by Victor Turner, who used it to describe the sense of comradeship between a community of persons which is not necessarily bound by a shared place attachment or a shared living space. *Communitas* exists in a community of individuals who are aware of their common liminal or marginal situation, and emerges in situations where the structure of daily life is not in force (Turner 1969). In subsequent decades, the term has been appropriated by a variety of scholars to describe the tendency of people to reaffirm social bonds in times of disaster, shared trauma, or social disruption. A wide array of ethnographers have argued that periods of social and cultural upheaval often generate feelings of solidarity (Turtle 1975; Myerhoff 1975; Hearn 1980; Jentoft 1993).

One common manifestation of *communitas* is play. Peter Reynolds has noted that: “In a quickly changing environment, when institutionalized behaviour proves unrewarding and established constraints weaken, an increase in play subcultures and play groups engaged in an exploratory and innovative search for alternative systems of meaning is generally found” (Reynolds 1976: 628). By turning to games and other collective amusements during turbulent times, people can search for new forms of meaning when established ones no longer fit the situation. Through play, people are able to experiment with new ways of thinking and acting. In a similar vein, Eric Klinger wrote that play allows for “...the stretching of available schemes so as to provide an experiential bridge between an established cognitive repertory and a strange new set of circumstances” (1969: 29).

This model helps to explain the sudden devotion of many Barren Shore residents to heavy gambling on VLTs. As discussed in the previous chapter, VLTs sit paradoxically between the traditional and the modern. Simultaneously, they offer players a chance to embrace the familiar worlds of club life and community-based gambling, while allowing them to experiment with behaviour patterns which had not been explored as much in years past, such as: individual money management, consumerism, and the pursuit of material wealth. Whether or not any of these new behaviour patterns will, in fact, prove themselves to be successful adaptations to the new economic and social circumstances which now govern life on the Barren Shore remains to be seen.

4.3.4.2 FRIENDSHIP AND CONFESSION

In addition to sharing a sense of generalized fellowship, many of the Gamblers had formed very close individual friendships with each other as well. Several of the players said that they were more comfortable sharing intimate details about their lives with their gambling friends than they were with their other friends, or with family members. Some said that this was because they felt certain that their fellow players would not violate their confidence. Most of the heaviest Gamblers said that they had all learned to respect a code of silence, or as a few players referred to it “*a code of thieves*,” which required that they not divulge the details of each other’s financial situations or spending patterns to non-Gamblers.

*We talk freely about how much we win or lose, but we don’t tell anybody else.
Whatever you do, you don’t tell spouses and relatives.*

This code of silence seemed to enter into other domains as well. A few players spoke openly to each other about the fact that they were having extramarital affairs, or about other details of their lives which they didn’t feel able to share with their romantic partners or family members. The

Gamblers provided a safe space for each other, in which they could talk candidly about their thoughts, feelings, and actions without jeopardizing their other relationships.

Disclosures of this nature helped to forge a special kind of closeness between many of the Gamblers, the likes of which few of them had been able to find elsewhere. One woman explained:

Even though you might think that we only talked about the gambling, we also knew each other's personal lives. We can give each other advice. We know each other's spouses and kids. We have relationships that go beyond the gambling itself. We really try to take care of each other.

Because many of the Gamblers were going through similar experiences, such as unemployment, financial strain, or familial unrest, they were uniquely suited to offer each other nonjudgmental counsel and support.

Gambling friends also assisted each other within the context of the gambling scene. The Gamblers were continually engaged in efforts to help each other to maximize the enjoyment, and returns from their VLT playing, often at the expense of occasional players. On crowded days when there was a line up to play the VLTs, Gamblers would typically invite their friends to “buddy up” on their machine, especially when they did not have much money left. The two would then play together for a few minutes, at which point, the first Gambler would leave the machine to the new Gambler, effectively allowing that player to cut into line ahead of all others. Similarly, Gamblers would often brief each other about the recent histories of each machine so that they would all know which ones were believed to be “up the most,” and therefore the most likely to offer big payouts.⁶⁸ This wisdom was not offered as readily to occasional players. Most Gamblers said that they hoped for the people who had invested large amounts of money into the

⁶⁸This practice is rooted in the widely held belief that each machine operates independently of all others. The significance of this belief is explored in more detail in Chapter Six.

machines, and resented it when an occasional players received big wins.

4.3.4.3 IDENTITY AND NOTORIETY

A third social reward of being a Gambler was that it provided players with a sense of identity within the group, and, by extension, a sense of notoriety in the community at large. Many of the Gamblers had developed very specific gambling personas. In turn, most Gamblers had come to know each other's playing styles and favourite bets very well.

We all know how everyone else plays. Like, if any of the real Gamblers walked through that door right now, I could tell you what they're gonna bet. You know, like Jack is Mr. 37, Rachael is number 21, and the list goes on. And once you're known as having a certain bet, it's like you own it. If I bet 19, people would say, 'Oh, you can't bet that. That's Frank's bet.'

The fact that these trademark bets were so well respected attests to the strong value placed on individuality in the region.

Most Gamblers had come to anticipate each other's behaviour in other ways as well. For example, some players were known for always stopping the wheels immediately, while others were known for always letting them roll out on their own. Others were known for talking to the machines in a certain way, kicking the machines, or any number of other distinctive behaviour patterns.

Because of the shared knowledge that Gamblers had developed about each other, the names of some players would routinely come up in conversations between others, even when they were not present at the club. A player's image could also effect the way that he was greeted when he arrived at the club, the way that people spoke to him after he got a big win, and whether or not people spoke to him after he had lost a lot of money. The opportunity to cultivate a unique personality within the group of Gamblers brought many players a sense of personal identity and

belonging. This seemed to be especially important to unemployed Gamblers, many of whom did not feel that sense of belonging in any other facets of their lives.

As a result of their close affiliation with the group of Gamblers, many individuals also received some degree of notoriety in the world outside the club as well. The extreme generosity of the group had become widely known among the occasional gamblers, and even among some people who rarely frequented the club. Although some of these persons spoke disdainfully of the fiscal irresponsibility of the group, many occasional gamblers seemed to look up to them. This may be due to the fact that the uncertain predicaments experienced by most of the Gamblers were not unique to these persons. A large segment of the Barren Shore population were experiencing similarly unsettling situations. The uniqueness of the Gamblers was that they were one of the only social groups who appeared to be having fun in spite of this uncertainty. The willingness of the group to laugh in the face of catastrophe and take enormous financial risks helped to cultivate a kind of charisma that was not matched elsewhere. This, in turn inspired others to join them. As one Gambler explained:

When you gamble heavy, you get to be a part of the set. And whatever some people say about us, we are respected, even if it might be for all the wrong reasons.

This respect helped many Gamblers to uphold a sense of self-worth, despite the fact that many were experiencing problems in other aspects of their lives. If nothing else, they had a sense of superiority over other players, who were not courageous enough to take large risks.

4.4 EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE: SITUATIONS WHEN KEEPING WINNINGS IS MORE ACCEPTABLE

Although leaving the bar after winning was generally condemned, there were a few

situations in which it was deemed to be more acceptable, or even encouraged. The first are those situations in which the player announced, in advance, that he particularly needed the money for some other purpose. The second were those situations in which a person who was known to be particularly impoverished or was dependent on social assistance played the machines.

4.4.1 GAMBLING IN TIMES OF NEED TO OBTAIN QUICK CASH

One of the only situations in which leaving the bar with winnings was more widely tolerated was when the player particularly needed money to help her to pay for something that she particularly needed. Some situations of 'money gambling' that I observed included trying to win enough to cover a phone bill payment and prevent a disconnection, trying to win enough to fill a car's gas tank, trying to win enough to renew a truck driving license for employment purposes, and trying to win enough to buy a specific birthday present for a child.

VLTs stood as one of the only legal ways for obtaining quick cash in the area. Despite their less than favourable rates of return, many people found VLTs to be an attractive alternative to borrowing money from friends or family, or waiting until the necessary funds could be obtained through conventional sources of income. Usually, VLTs were used for these purposes when the player had some money but not enough to pay for a desired commodity or service. In most of these cases, the player knew that she would be receiving more money at some point in the near future, so losing her wager would not force her to sacrifice economic necessities for very long, if at all. In these situations, the potential satisfaction of winning enough to cover the entire expense outweighed the risk of losing what money she already had. If the player was fortunate enough to win the amount that she was seeking, she would usually stop playing and leave the club.

Even in these situations, players often faced stigma from some of the Gamblers if they did

not at least buy a round after hitting the bells. Sometimes, even leaving the bar with money when the bells had not been hit, brought animosity from the Gamblers. The extent to which this disapproval was articulated seemed to depend, in large part, on the degree of knowledge that the other Gamblers had about the player's situation, however. In cases where the need for money was seen as legitimate, most of the Gamblers tended to be more sympathetic. For this reason, a player gambling with a specific economic agenda often made this motive explicit at the beginning of the gambling session, and sometimes repeated it to as many people as she could.

It is important to note that while this type of strategy was occasionally employed by several of the core Gamblers, and many of the occasional players, there were a few Gamblers who, on principle, would never leave with any of their winnings. In most cases, however, these persons were more affluent than the others, and could afford to take this stance without experiencing severe financial problems. Even some of the less wealthy Gamblers, however, expressed the belief that players who left with their winnings were not *"real Gamblers."*

4.4.2 GAMBLING BY SOCIAL ASSISTANCE RECIPIENTS AS A MEANS OF STRETCHING PAYCHECKS

Leaving the club with winnings also seemed to be more accepted when it was done by persons who were known to be particularly poor, by community standards. Though it was very rare for persons in the lowest income groups to play VLTs heavily, a fairly large number of them had taken to playing the machines one or two times a month in an effort to supplement their incomes. It was fairly common for social assistance recipients, or the poorest members of the working class, to play the machines when they received their checks, in the hopes of stretching their payments further. Usually, these players would set aside a fixed stake for gambling, perhaps

thirty dollars out of a two hundred and fifty dollar check. If they were fortunate enough to get a large win, or even a series of small wins, they would usually punch out their ticket and leave with the money they had won. As one bartender explained:

If they (social assistance recipients) can wager twenty-five or thirty dollars and come out with a hundred, that goes a long way because they're not getting much money to begin with. I'd say that 95 percent of social services recipients spend their money on their families. They're just trying to get a little more to spend on a few extra groceries or whatever. Of course there are five or ten percent that spend more than they should.

Most bartenders estimated that a majority of the overall number of players were receiving social assistance payments.⁶⁹ Such statements were generally qualified with explanations that social assistance recipients did not play often. Rather, most of these players would come in within a day or two of receiving their checks to play the machines, and would not be seen again for another month. VLTs were a particularly attractive form of entertainment for many people in lower income groups, because they allowed them to treat themselves to some time at the club, and offered the chance, however slim, of coming out ahead. Whereas money spent on alcohol could not be recouped, VLTs offered the possibility that the expenditure would be won back. Another appealing quality of VLTs for those with lower incomes was that they offered the same chance of winning to people of all income groups. As long as players were able to afford the minimum bet, they could stand on an equal footing with the other players.

For the most part, the very fact that social assistance recipients were playing at all was upsetting to the other players, many of whom complained that their gambling made it even more difficult for them to provide their families with necessities. In contrast to the social assistance

⁶⁹Estimates ranged from as low as 40 percent to as high as 75 percent of all players.

recipients, most of the Gamblers would be classified as working class, having modest but regular incomes. While few had reserve money, most had high enough salaries that they could usually get away with a day of modest overspending without immediately facing severe personal consequences stemming from the loss. Social assistance recipients were not so lucky. One player remarked:

They are a bit more conservative but, I mean, they absolutely cannot afford to be there. Whatever they are getting is just enough for bare essentials.⁷⁰ It's just enough to live on, and yet they play the fucking machines. And you know that a child is going to go hungry. I don't know how they do it because there is no food bank here or any other source of help. The kids must be living on Kraft Dinner and bread. I know they don't have enough money to provide balanced meals for the children. I think they only get two hundred and forty dollars every two weeks. If they drop a hundred on booze and the machines, there is not too much left to feed them. I hate to see the people who can't afford it putting in money and losing.

Most Gamblers said that they hoped for the people that they felt “deserved it.” Many said that they wanted the games to serve as a leveller between income groups, although it was generally recognized that this was impossible because it was almost exclusively those in lower income groups that played.⁷¹ Thus, many of the Gamblers said that if social assistance recipients insisted on playing, they hoped that they would win money, and put it to good use in their day-to-day lives.

⁷⁰The average bi-weekly payment for social assistance recipients living in the province of Newfoundland is \$270, or \$135 per week. (Human Resources Development Canada, Communications Branch 1998).

⁷¹It was extremely rare to find members of the more affluent class (doctors, teachers, clergy, politicians, etc.) in local clubs. This class tended to avoid clubs, and with them, VLTs. Those that did play tended to travel to larger centres, as a way of ensuring their anonymity and protecting their names in the community. Because of the detachment of this class, it is safe to say that the Barren Shore clubs are strictly working class (and underclass) environments.

Chapter Five

IN SEARCH OF THE BELLS: THE IMPORTANCE OF EXCITEMENT

Beyond the social and economic rewards brought by winning on VLTs, many Gamblers also regarded winning as desirable for other reasons. The most commonly cited was the sense of exhilaration that many players experienced. While it is evident that big wins tend to induce feelings of intense excitement in many players, several people said that they also got excited when they were not winning, but were merely anticipating a win. The sense of risk and fatefulness aroused by anticipation seems to be just as stimulating as winning for some people. For these players, it is not so much getting a big win as feeling as though they have a chance to win that matters most. It also appears that the excitement brought about by anticipation is not always present, but is dependent on a variety of situational variables which lead players to believe that a win is just around the corner. In evaluating the results of the gambling session, many people did not speak in terms of wins and losses, but in terms of the degree of excitement they were able to derive from the overall experience of playing.

5.1 THE THRILL OF WINNING

It is important to recognize that, for most people, winning meant far more than the material prizes associated with it. For one thing, players needed to win money in order to be able to spend it freely. Few had saved up enough money to support consistently high betting over an extended period of time. It was only when they won money that they were able to experiment with higher betting, and other cavalier spending patterns. Also, some received a variety of emotional rewards which went far beyond the monetary payouts derived from big wins.

Several players said that they routinely experienced intense feelings of excitement when they received big wins, particularly when they hit the swinging bells. Hitting the bells tended to bring forth a wave of excitement, which most had come to call "*the rush*."⁷² Many said they found that large wins brought on physiological reactions as well, such as an accelerated heart rate (72%, 18/25), dizziness or disorientation (40%, 10/25), and perspiration (36%, 9/25). One man described his experiences with hitting the bells as follows:

Your heart rate speeds up when you hit the bells and you know right away that you're going to get two, three, four hundred bucks. Your adrenaline goes through the roof.

Another explained:

If I win, it's wonderful. I get the sweaty palms, shaky hands, butterflies in my stomach. Sometimes I'll break out into a cold sweat. I was first attracted to the machines because they gave me this great response. That was the first time I had felt something so intense for fifteen years.

Some players focussed on the feelings of joy that hitting the bells brought to them. Many said that the sense of elation that followed a big win often stayed with them long after they left the club.

One Gambler said that a big win on the machines put him into a good mood for the entire week.

Another described the happiness that winning brought her by saying:

It's like I'm hearing good news or I'm happy or euphoric about something. I'm on cloud nine.

A similar feeling was described by Alexandra King in Diary of a Powerful Addiction:

The excitement (brought by winning) was almost too much for me to handle. Upon leaving the establishment, I felt like I was walking on a cloud; I could have waltzed to work whispering 'thank you, thank you' (1999: 68).

⁷²Other terms used to describe the feeling that followed hitting the bells included: "*exhilaration*," "*euphoria*," "*thrilling*," "*a high*," "*action*," "*adrenaline*" and "*adventure*."

5.1.1 PARALLELS BETWEEN WINNING ON VLTs AND OTHER EXCITING EXPERIENCES

Five of the twenty-five Gamblers (20%) compared the feeling of hitting the bells to the highs they had experienced after taking mind-altering drugs. The most common comparisons were to marijuana and amphetamine (speed). Only a few compared the feeling to that of drunkenness. This seems to be because the high brought on by alcohol builds gradually, while the other two drugs have an almost immediate effect.⁷³ One former intravenous drug user explained:

I have to compare it to a drug high because for me it is. I was drug dependent for many years, and winning on those machines feels almost like the rush I used to get from amphetamine.

Another man who had previously been a regular marijuana smoker said:

It's a bit like somebody getting a good buzz on the go. You know, people go out and they get stoned and whatever? Well that game effects me the same as that. I know I don't play for the money. It's for the high if anything. I don't smoke drugs much anymore — that's my high now. Your adrenaline starts going, your heart is pumping. You gets right into it.

This man's experience was paralleled by those of several former alcohol or drug users who believed that VLTs had come to occupy the role formerly played by drugs in their lives. The machines allowed them to regularly achieve a state of euphoria in the same way that the drugs had done before.

Two players who had used mind-altering drugs regularly in previous years said that if they were ever to stop playing VLTs, they would probably return to their old habits. Underlying

⁷³One player pointed out that the high brought by hitting the bells was very different from any drug high he had ever experienced, because it often came and went several times in the same night. Also, it could be quickly replaced by an emotionally low period, if he suddenly got onto a losing streak. This, he said, was not the case with his other drug experiences, which tended to be more predictable.

statements of this nature was the belief that they needed some kind of visceral high in their lives. This point is particularly interesting, considering how recently drugs and alcohol have become easily accessible to people living on the Shore. Whereas most people from older generations had tended to only consume alcohol on special occasions, many of those who came of age in the seventies, eighties and nineties had experimented with marijuana ("*draws*"), hallucinogenic mushrooms ("*shrooms*"), LSD ("*acid*"), and other drugs. Also, many of the younger people had grown accustomed to drinking alcohol in much higher amounts, and with much greater regularity, than those in older age cohorts.

It may be that regular exposure to these dissociating experiences helped to nurture a value on mind-altering among younger people that had not been present in previous generations. This, in turn, may have rendered these persons more receptive to the disorienting elements of playing VLTs. Indeed, one very regular player in his early forties took great pride in telling me that his generation had been the pioneers of the hallucinogenic age, because they had discovered the inebriating properties of locally indigenous mushrooms and had been the first to benefit from the importation of marijuana and LSD from mainland Canada and the United States.

It was also quite common for players to compare the thrill of playing VLTs to other exciting experiences in their lives such as having sex or playing competitive sports. Several of those that had fished for a living said that part of the appeal for them was that playing the machines provided the same sense of excitement and uncertainty that they derived from fishing. A few fishers said that playing VLTs had many of the same dimensions of fishing, particularly hook and line fishing, because one's success could vary so much from one day to the next.

There is a connection with the fishery, because both are unpredictable. You always hope for the big catch, just like you play for the big win. It's always a gamble when you go fishing.

One fisher added that the excitement of “jigging the bells” felt much like the excitement of “jigging” a cod.

The importance of the excitement brought about by winning in stimulating further gambling has long been recognized by students of the psychology of gambling behaviour. Most psychological perspectives have stressed the importance of emotional, and even physiological arousal as a primary reward for gambling. Zuckerman (1979) argued that gambling is an exercise in “sensation seeking,” meaning that it is the sensory stimulation provided by gambling, particularly gambling and winning, that inspires persistent play. This was picked up by Boyd (1982), who argued that excitement is “the gambler’s drug.”

In an effort to test the sensation seeking argument empirically, Anderson and Brown (1984) attempted to measure the heart rates of regular gamblers. They found that when tested in field conditions, most heavy gamblers experienced an accelerated heart rate while playing. They were not, however, able to duplicate these results in laboratory settings. Mark Griffiths (1990b) has attempted to extend these findings to players of electronic gambling games. Many of the gamblers that he has studied have also reported an accelerated heart rate during play, especially after winning. Griffiths has argued that it is partly the urge to recapture this ‘altered’ state that stimulates recurrent gambling.

5.2 THE ROLE OF ANTICIPATION

Several players said that they felt that it was just as much fun to anticipate a big win, even if it never arrived. For these players, it was less the need to win than the hope of winning, and the

tension of waiting for a win, that prompted them to play. One of the Gamblers remarked:

You gets excited because you don't know. It could be the next spin. It's all or nothing. Like I won two hundred last night, and maybe I might win it again today. If I put five dollars in, I've got as much chance as anyone else to win. That puts you in a fun mood. You're not bored anymore. Nobody is expecting to win, but at the same time, everyone is hoping for the biggest win ever.

A few players indicated that the wins that they did get sometimes felt anti-climactic because they had been enlivened by anticipation for so long. Some players said that their heart rates regularly stayed up for the entire time they were playing. One woman said that she was prone to what she called “*anxiety attacks*” while she was playing VLTs, and that these attacks seemed to be unrelated to whether she was winning or losing. She added that one day in the middle of an uneventful session she was struck by an attack that was so extreme that she was convinced that she was having a heart attack.

The excitement generated in these moments of anticipation was explored by Erving Goffman in his 1967 essay, “Where the Action Is.” Goffman believed that the thrill of gambling comes from the accumulation and resolution of tension during each play and by the sense of risk that it brings to the individual. He argued that each play of the game provides the players with a form of excitement that is not easily available in their everyday lives. Unlike most “safe and silent places” such as the workplace or the home, the gambling environment provides the individual with a unique sense of fatefulness, because it offers an opportunity to “...lay himself on the line and place himself in jeopardy during a passing moment” (1967: 204-205).

Goffman broke the ritual process surrounding gambling into four distinct segments: “*squaring off*,” in which a challenge is presented and rules are set; *determination*, the actual play producing an outcome; *disclosure*, the brief but suspenseful time between the completion of play

and the participants' realization of the result; and finally, the *settlement*, in which the players acknowledge the result (Ibid., 153-156). In the case of VLT gambling, these stages take the form of setting a bet (squaring off), pressing the button to activate the wheels (determination), waiting anxiously for the wheels to stop spinning, or choosing the appropriate moment to stop them (disclosure), and processing the result and deciding whether to play again (settlement).

The micro-level perspective generated by Goffman helps to explain the thrill that many VLT players derive from anticipating the result of each spin. As Goffman explains:

The individual releases himself to the passing moment, wagering his future state on what transpires precariously in the seconds to come. At such moments a special affective state is likely to be aroused, emerging transformed into excitement (Ibid., 137).

A major reason for the popularity of VLTs may be that, unlike horse racing, bingo, lottery tickets, or betting on sporting events, the time required to complete this cycle on a VLT is only a few seconds. Thus, each player is likely to experience many more periods of uncertainty and intense anticipation over the course of the gambling session than would players of most other games. A similar point was raised up by Rob Lynch (1990) in his studies of poker machine players. Lynch contended that one of the main reasons for the appeal of the machines is that they allow the player to experience a great many outcomes over the course of the session. As a consequence, the player may undergo "...a rich flow of emotion related to the machines," which may include feelings such as: "excitement, elation, frustration and despair" (1990: 198).

5.2.1 FACTORS ADDING TO THE EXCITEMENT OF ANTICIPATION

Though it may not always be necessary for a player to achieve a big win to experience feelings of excitement, the degree to which such feelings can be brought on by merely anticipating

a win is contingent on a number of other factors.

a) Winning Earlier in the Session

Some players indicated that the tension brought by anticipation was particularly acute after they had received at least one win during the session. A big win, or a series of smaller wins, led some players to believe that they or their machine was “*hot*,” and that they would soon receive a large payout. Most players observed that wins tended to be clustered together in groups. Some had noticed that VLTs would, for example, not produce any winning patterns for ten spins, and then give eight winning patterns in a row. When a player’s machine offered a few consecutive wins, it was not uncommon for him to get visibly excited, and announce that his machine was “*starting to get hot*.”

A recognition of the excitement precipitated by a string of wins was incorporated into the structure of the buddy system as well. A strict code of rules had been established for situations in which two or more players decided to partner up on the same machine. One player would take the first spin. If she managed to win a number of credits which was greater than or equal to the number of credits that she had bet, she was allowed to spin again. If she did not win any credits, or won an amount that was not equal to her bet, she surrendered the machine to her buddy. The buddy’s spin would then be governed by the same rules. By adopting this system, rather than changing turns after each spin, the players ensured that one of them would be allowed to reap full excitement from a hot period.

Previous wins also provided some players with the sense that they were, “...*playing with the machine’s money*,” which made them feel as though they could afford to “...*wait out the machine*” without incurring personal financial losses. These beliefs led some to feel that they were

well situated for big a win, and heightened the degree of excitement that they derived from the session. On some fortuitous occasions, winning and anticipating operated in a continuous cycle, with each successful spin further increasing the player's level of optimism regarding the prospect of future wins. This sometimes led to higher and higher betting, in an effort to obtain a very large win.

b) Near Misses

Another factor in bringing about a heightened sense of anticipation for some players was the experience of "near misses." The term was first coined by Reid (1986) who used a rigged slot machine to demonstrate that unsuccessful spins that appear close to being successful (i.e. a pattern in which all symbols except one are in the position to indicate a big win) tends to increase excitement, and encourage future play, in much the same way that wins do. He also suggested that gambling machine manufacturers are aware of this fact, and that many design machines that produce a disproportionately high number of near misses. This appears to be the case in Newfoundland, as well. It was fairly common to see a machine give a pattern that was just one symbol away from the swinging bells. In most cases, this prompted the player to continue gambling with the assumption that the machine "wanted to give the bells." One player explained:

Every now and then it will give you a pattern which is just off the bells. You figure that you will get them right away, but that's not so likely.

During one of my days at the bar, I observed a man stopping the wheels to reveal a pattern which showed all of the bells in their proper positions except for the last one, which could be seen dangling above the watermelon which occupied its proper place. This infuriated the man, who slammed his fist down upon the machine, and then proceeded to show the pattern to all other

patrons in the club, claiming that he had been robbed. After he had made his misfortune apparent to all present, the man sat down again to play some more. Outburst such as this one were quite common in near miss situations. Most often, players who experienced near misses played even more aggressively, determined that a win would soon be on the way.

c) Seeing Others Winning

Several players said that seeing others winning around them tended to excite them as well. Some indicated that it was seeing how excited others got when they won that motivated them to try out the games in the first place. The variety of sounds, flashes of light and colours produced by a machine that has just delivered a big win seem designed to draw the attention of all players in the vicinity. This was particularly true when the winning player was "*betting high*," because it took longer for the high pitched sound of the credits being added to the player's bank to subside.

A few players told me that seeing another player winning often led them to think that their turn would come next. This was reinforced by the popular belief that the machines tended to pay the swinging bells in sequence. Two bartenders told me that they believed that the machines were more apt to pay out when they were all in use, so that they would catch the attention of a greater number of players.

d) A History of Success

It came to my attention fairly early in my fieldwork period that a high proportion of the Gamblers had hit the swinging bells on their first or second time playing. In many cases, the excitement brought by that sudden windfall was enough to keep them coming back for more.

The first time I played them, I won a hundred and thirty-five dollars. I printed out the ticket and I never stopped since.

Newer players who had experienced an unusually high degree of success in their prior gambling endeavours seemed particularly likely to overestimate their chances of winning. Some said they usually expected that they were going to win, when they arrived to go to the club to play. Consequently, these players were more apt to say that they felt excited when they started playing.

e) Betting Unusually High Amounts

Many players found that, over time, it had become more difficult to replicate the thrill that they experienced when they first started playing. This, in conjunction with social pressures, led them to gradually increase their bets. As one player explained:

When I first won a hundred bucks, I thought it was great. Now that's nothing. It takes more and more to get that high.

This behaviour is well chronicled in the gambling machine literature. Griffiths (1993) has pointed out that "...several studies demonstrate that some fruit machine players feel that they have to gamble more and more and with increasing amounts of money to get the desired arousal level that they once got gambling with lesser money" (1993: 55). In his field studies in UK amusement arcades, Griffiths has found that the heartbeats of non-regular gamblers tend to stay higher for longer than those of regular gamblers, suggesting that states of excitement come more easily to newer players (Ibid., 55).

For several players, the solution to their diminishing returns of excitement was to set specific goals for themselves. The most common was to get the swinging bells while betting fifty credits (\$2.50) per spin, the maximum allowable bet. Others said that they wanted to get a full screen of sevens on a fifty bet, though this goal was considerably less common. Frequently,

Gamblers would try wagering fifty credits for a few spins, when they were able to get their credits up high enough to justify taking the chance.⁷⁴ Few could sustain this wager for long without using up all of their credits, however. This practice was so common, that some expressed open displeasure when someone hit the bells on a low bet, because they saw it as taking away somebody else's chances of hitting them while betting high.

The five hundred dollars that hitting the bells on the maximum bet would likely fetch was rarely enough to make up for a heavy player's previous losses. Nonetheless, many said that, were they ever able to achieve this feat, they would give up playing VLTs for good. In practice, however, few of those that were successful in reaching their goal kept their promise. More often, that goal was simply replaced by a new one. Betting the maximum amount endowed each spin with an added sense of importance, because it presented a much greater degree of financial risk to the individual. Though only a few players had actually experienced a big win on a fifty bet, some players said that they benefited from the feelings of intense excitement that were brought on taking this risk, even if they never won. The ALC actively encouraged players to take this chance, by equipping each machine with a "maximum bet" button, which allowed players to put their bet up to the maximum quickly and easily with the push of a button. To bet anything less than fifty, players have to increase their bet in one credit increments.

f) Running Low on Funds

The last situation which often added to the thrill of anticipation came about when players were gambling with the last of their money. In these instances, players often paid very close

⁷⁴Of the twenty-five gamblers interviewed, twenty-two (88%) said that they sometimes bet fifty, while only three (12%) said that they never did.

attention to the outcomes of each spin, in the hopes that they would get a substantial win and thereby prolong the gambling session. These moments of suspense further enhanced feelings of excitement.

5.2.2 THE RISK OF A QUICK LOSS

Although winning was not necessarily essential for players to derive excitement from a session, most said they needed to get some kind of “*action*” out of their game in order to make playing worth while. This was not always possible, however. It was quite common for VLTs to take all of the player’s money very quickly, without granting him even the thrill of anticipation. Several players said that it was these quick losses that felt like the greatest defeats. In these instances, players found themselves quickly returning to the states of boredom or uneasiness that initially prompted them to go to the club in the first place, but with less money than they started with. For some people, these situations tended to bring about feelings of intense anger, frustration, or depression.⁷⁵

These findings suggest that VLT players subdivide their gambling sessions into at least three categories: those that result in big wins, those that do not result in big wins, but offer some entertainment value thanks to a particularly long and eventful session, and those that do not result in wins and do not offer any entertainment value. Because wins rarely resulted in economic profit anyway, most players said that they were quite happy if their session offered them some excitement and a chance to occupy themselves at the club for a while, whether or not it included a big win.

It could be argued that VLT players’ quests for excitement that are gambles in themselves, because players do not always receive what they come for. Two of the Gamblers commented that

⁷⁵These emotions are explored further in Chapters Nine and Ten.

the one advantage that alcohol and drugs continued to hold over the machines was that they always yielded their desired result. One man explained:

With booze or a draw⁷⁶, you know what you're getting for your money. It is predictable. Twelve beers will get you drunk. A gram will get you stoned. With these machines, you never know what you're gonna get. They can leave you feeling wonderful, but then other times, they don't give you fuck all.

In these situations, some players were tempted to seek more money, whether by going home or by borrowing from others, in the hope of bringing about their desired sense of excitement. A few of the Gamblers would occasionally resolve to not leave the club until they received at least one win. These vows often came at great financial cost to the player.⁷⁷

⁷⁶A “draw” is the locally used term for a ‘joint’ of marijuana.

⁷⁷This ‘must-win’ gambling is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Eight.

Chapter Six

THE GHOST IN THE MACHINE: COMPETITION, RITUAL AND PERSONIFICATION

Several players said that the greatest attraction of VLTs was that they provided a challenge and an opportunity to engage in a mental struggle. For many people, attempts to influence the outcome of the game provided a feeling of competition that was otherwise missing from their lives. This chapter looks at some of the ways in which players sought to manipulate VLTs, in an effort to bring about winning results.

Surprisingly, the odds of winning and the expected payback of the machines seemed of little interest to most players. Very few had tried to obtain this information. Instead, most of the players vested faith in their capacity to develop techniques or 'skills' to improve their chances of coming out ahead. This first part of this chapter explores beliefs held by gamblers about the role of 'skill' in influencing the outcome of the game, and examines some of the most common 'skills' that were employed. The latter part examines two of the ways in which some players redefined their experiences, and sought new avenues to influence the outcome of the game when their 'skills' proved unsuccessful. The first is the tendency for some players to elevate the importance of 'luck' as an explanatory concept. The other is a turn toward direct verbal and/or physical interaction with the machines themselves.

The efforts of players to impose their personal styles and beliefs onto the machines appear to be semi-conscious efforts to bring meaning to the act of playing. If a player assumes that he can do nothing to influence the result of the game, it very quickly loses most of its appeal. Thus, it may be that the maintenance of a belief that it is possible to exercise some degree of control over

one's fate, provided a rationale for assuming a level of mental absorption in the game that would not be possible otherwise.

6.1 ODDS

Why do people continue to gamble despite consistent losses? This question has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention. Students of 'subjective probability' have compared the actual odds of coming out ahead in various gambling games with players' perceptions of those odds. The discrepancies that have been observed have usually been taken as explanations for the decisions of these persons to engage in practices which, from an economic standpoint at least, seem irrational (Cohen and Hansel 1956; Gilovich 1983).

In Newfoundland, VLTs do not display any information about the odds of winning or the expected payback. If a person were to take the initiative to consult the Atlantic Lottery Corporation, she would be told that the machines pay back between eighty and ninety-six percent of the amount wagered (ALC 2000). This figure is somewhat misleading, however, because it corresponds to the expected payback in credits on any given spin. The actual payback may be considerably lower, or higher. Also, the figure does not account for situations in which a player allows his newly won credits to build up in his electronic bank, and then loses them through more gambling before he can exchange them for cash. Thus, the percentage of the total expenditures that are actually punched out of the machine in cash payments would be expected to be considerably less. The Atlantic Lottery Corporation does not make this latter figure available to the public. Though I made several efforts to obtain information about the actual cash payout of the machines, none of the ALC representatives that I spoke with knew the figure off hand. One person, who elected to remain anonymous, said that he wasn't sure whether the ALC kept track of

this information at all.

In an effort to come up with an estimate of the actual cash payout, I collected a series of receipts from Swinging Bells machines in a three different bars -- two in the field site and one in St. John's. Receipts, which are printed out by the machine at the end of each day, show the complete history of the machine since it has been in the establishment. They include figures on how much the machine has taken in and paid out, both over the course of the week and over the course of it's lifetime in that venue. While they are not supposed to be seen by anyone who is not in the employment of the club, some bartenders were quite willing to show the receipts to interested parties. Also, some machines will occasionally print out a receipt accidentally, when they are printing out a player's pay slip. In these instances, they were usually taken by players, in the hopes that they would bring insights into the operating system of the game.

The eleven receipts that I collected suggested that the machines had paid an average of seventy-one percent of what they had taken in since they had first been installed. The highest payout given by any single machine was seventy-seven percent of what was taken in, while the lowest payout was sixty-five percent.

Most players told me that they had heard nothing about the odds or expected payouts of the machines. All were aware that the machines were structured to take in more than they paid out, but the extent of this discrepancy was not widely known. Only two of the twenty-nine interviewees reported to know the expected payout. One quoted the Atlantic Lottery Corporation figure of eighty to ninety-six percent, while the other reported that they had a seventy percent payback rate.⁷⁸ In both cases, the players believed that these could not possibly be the true odds,

⁷⁸This latter figure is more consistent with my study of the receipts.

as they had observed very few people who had come out ahead. One explained:

That (the ALC figure) is a bunch of bull droppings as far as I'm concerned. They don't pay out nothin' like that. They don't even give back fifty percent, I don't think, and I've seen a nice bit of this. I think they just tell you that to get you in the club. Even when she is paying out, ninety percent of the players spend it back in again.

The other told me:

Let me tell you, there is absolutely no way they pay what they say they do.

Three other players said that they had made efforts to find out how much the machines paid out by looking at receipts and asking other players, though none had tried to contact the provincial government or the ALC to get this information.

Players expressed mixed feelings about whether displaying the odds on the machines would exert any influence on gambling behaviour. Several said they thought it would be a good idea, but many expressed the belief that, no matter what the odds, experienced players would still hold out the hope of beating the system and coming out ahead. The most commonly cited reason for publishing the odds was that it might deter new players from starting to gamble heavily on the machines.

Most regular gamblers seemed to feel as though they had developed an intuitive sense of the odds over the course of their playing careers (though many thought the odds had worsened over time). Regular players almost invariably said that they had lost a lot more money than they had won since they had begun gambling on VLTs. Though this realization may have been made on an individual level by many players, it also appears that the entire group of regular players had become savvy to the fact that players were bound to lose in the long run.

It appears that, for many, it is not the expectation, but the hope of winning that is most

important. Nechama Tec (1964) argued that hope is a non-monetary reward for gambling which brings a sense of rationality to the endeavour. In a study of poker machine players, Rob Lynch (1990) made a similar claim, arguing that the creation of hope can become an end in itself. Several players expressed the belief that “*somebody has to win*” and thought that they were as likely a candidate as anybody else. This, of course, does not draw attention to the fact that as a group, they are expected to suffer a net loss one hundred percent of the time. One player explained:

We don't really want to know the odds. That means nothing to us. The only percentage we understand is what we go in with and what we go home with. We want to know, but we don't. Part of the addiction is thinking you are going to win. We think we have as good a chance as anybody. We do go in expecting to win, even though we know the difference. We have to fool ourselves. We have to have hope.

It seems clear that the hope of winning does motivate gambling for most players on at least some occasions, even though few expected that they would win consistently.

6.2 COMPETITION

VLTs differ from more entrenched forms of gambling, such as card games and bingo, because unlike these games, the machines do not pit players against each other directly. That is to say that one player's win does not necessitate losses by the others. Thus, players do not find themselves pitted against a clear opponent.

One might expect that the solitary, and seemingly non-competitive, nature of VLT gambling would render it undesirable to people living in rural Newfoundland, where competition, work, and recreation have long been closely associated. In addition to the long gambling heritage on the Shore, interviews with elderly members of the community revealed that, in past generations,

tests of strength and skill between men were quite common.⁷⁹ Furthermore, Louis Chiaramonte, who conducted fieldwork on the south coast of Newfoundland in the late sixties, found that fishermen were extremely competitive with one another. Chiaramonte (2000) stated that fishermen regularly measured their success not by raw quantity, but by catching more than everyone else caught, given the circumstances of the day. He also observed that a few fishers had nightmares about accidentally sleeping in on a day when all other boats went out.

Many players found ways of getting around the competition problem by inventing new ways of reinstating the other in the gambling process. The most common way was by personifying the VLT, and relating to it as one might to a human opponent. Several players said that the challenge of trying to beat the machine was more intriguing to them than the prospect of winning money.

I want competition. I am competing with the machines I guess. I don't know there is something. There's a challenge there, but it doesn't matter about the money. The money just isn't important.

Some players said that even though they knew that their chances of long-run success were minimal, they persisted in playing in the hopes of outsmarting the machine and coming out on top.

I'm wondering whether it's the challenge of trying to beat the machine. A lot of it has to do with beating the machine and it is computerized. We're trying to beat the computer. We know we're not going to do it, but the challenge is there.

You want to beat the machine. Your brain is bigger than that computer. That's the attraction for me. It wasn't the money because the money is going back in. I knew I wasn't going to leave with any money. It was personal. It was a challenge.

Comments of this nature seemed to be particularly common among persons who were

⁷⁹These contests were particularly common during garden parties and other public social events (Student Essays).

without regular employment. It appears that playing VLTs provided these players with a sense of intellectual stimulation that they could not derive from their jobs or from other aspects of their lives. Several said that they had more trouble finding things to stimulate their minds than they did when they were working. The struggle to figure out how to beat the VLTs provided an opportunity for these persons to animate their thoughts for a while, in the same way that a challenge in their job might have done before. Similar findings were reached by Robert Herman (1967), who argued that the decision-making quality common to most forms of gambling was particularly appealing for people in non-intellectual jobs because it gave them an opportunity to take control of their lives and make critical decisions in a way that was deprived of them in their working lives.

The importance of the belief that one can beat the system through strategic play was also explored by Irving Zola in his study of working class men in British betting shops. Zola (1963) found that many of the bettors that he spoke to believed that they could control their fate through careful decision-making. He argued that: "...by beating the system or outsmarting it by rational means they demonstrate that they can exercise control and for that brief moment, they can control their fate" (1963: 360). This provides a sense of self-worth and satisfaction that is often difficult to obtain in other aspects of their lives.

6.3 SKILL

The most common way in which efforts to control the machines were played out was through the cultivation of 'skills.' Many players believed that it was possible to increase their chances of winning by carefully studying the machines and developing techniques to better exploit the computer program that underlies the operation of the machines. Whether any of these 'skills'

have genuine merit is unclear. Nonetheless, most players expressed at least some faith that a well thought out strategy could improve one's success.

6.3.1 THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

One of the most influential contributions to the study of subjective probability is credited to Ellen Langer. Langer coined the term "the illusion of control" to explain the tendency of many gamblers to offer an "...expectancy of personal success inappropriately higher than the objective probability would warrant" (1975: 311). She believed that under some circumstances, players develop skill orientations when playing games of chance which lead them to believe that they have a greater control over the outcome than they actually do. Langer's ideas have been elaborated upon by others, who have demonstrated that many players tend to attribute their wins to their own skills and their losses to unforeseen events outside of their control (Oldman 1974; Gilovich 1983).

In several studies of fruit machine players, Mark Griffiths (1990a) has identified a number of perceived skills which may help to stimulate an illusion of control. These skills include such things as: watching all of the machines in order to develop a sense of which ones are due to pay out, memorizing the order of the symbols on each reel, superior hand-eye coordination, and a mastery of the specialized play features of each machine. Griffiths, along with a number of other researchers, has concluded that heavy players are more likely to demonstrate these types of skill orientations than are occasional gamblers (Griffiths 1990a; Dickerson 1984; Carroll and Huxley 1994).

6.3.2 ON THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE IN SHAPING BELIEFS ABOUT SKILL

Most studies of subjective probability have relied extensively on studies of individual cases. This, I would argue, has led to an overemphasis on the importance of individual imaginations in the

construction of skill beliefs. My research, by contrast, indicates that there is a remarkable similarity in the kinds of skill beliefs that players hold. This suggests one of two scenarios. The first possibility is that a variety of players may have individually tapped into the same genuine skills, which they all acquired independently over the course of their playing careers.

The second, and I believe more likely, possibility is that these beliefs have been culturally transmitted between players over time. As Swidler notes: "Culture provides a repertoire of capacities from which varying strategies of action may be constructed" (1986: 284). In other words, publicly shared meanings encourage certain patterns of action and discourage others. The cultural realm provides a tool kit out of which individual strategies are formed. Thus, in order to understand the forms of rationality that an actor employs, it is important to first understand the system of meanings that are shared by the group to which the actor belongs.

This sharing of meanings appears to be at work in the VLT-playing community of the Barren Shore. It was fairly common for players to offer advice to others about how to interpret the outcome of each spin, or sequence of spins, and how best to proceed. The most common scenario was for experienced players to counsel newer players about the finer nuances of play. Experienced gamblers also exchanged their views with each other from time to time, though some dismissed the advice of others as superstition. It seemed as though most of the veteran players had come to recognize the areas where they differed from others, and were reluctant to abandon their battle-tested strategies in favour of new ones.

We exchange our views about how to play, but people have usually won a few times playing a certain way, so they stick to it. They play the way they've always played.

Although it was very common for players to hold minor differences of opinion regarding

what did and did not constitute a legitimate insight, the overarching systems of meaning governing these beliefs were rarely challenged. For example, two players may disagree about whether large quantities of oranges or large quantities of watermelons are the sign that the swinging bells will soon come, but most accepted the idea that the knowledge derived from observing the patterns preceding the swinging bells could be used predict their arrival. It seems clear that exposure to collective norms concerning what is, and is not, legitimately considered a 'skill' helps to shape the range of actions that the individual actor sees as being available to her.

6.33 COMMONLY PRACTISED 'SKILLS'

With a few exceptions, skill beliefs that were regularly adhered to can be summarized into five main categories. These are: picking the right machine, knowing the history of each machine, understanding the patterns of symbols produced by the game, developing a sound betting strategy, and stopping the wheels at the right time.

6.3.3.1 PICKING THE RIGHT MACHINE

As mentioned, many players held the belief that VLTs tend to run in "*hot*" and "*cold*" streaks. Thus, most felt that there was skill in picking a machine that was in a "*pay mode*" and avoiding the ones that were not. A machine that was paying out, even in small amounts, was thought to be more likely to offer a large payout than one that was not paying out at all. The most commonly agreed upon sign that a machine was starting to pay was that it would begin to show a lot of sevens.⁸⁰

⁸⁰Sevens offer one of the highest payouts available other than the bells or the bonus. If the player receives less than three sevens, they do not receive any payment. If they receive three sevens, however, they receive double the amount they bet. Four sevens yields triple their bet. Five sevens yields quadruple, and so on.

I still think the bells are more likely to come when the machine is paying. When it is giving a lot of sevens, it usually means that it wants to pay out. It's ready to pay out.

If I get a continuous cycle of sevens, I get it in my head that she 's paying out, so I'll be more likely to spend more money. I have found that when she 's giving out a lot of sevens, the bells will usually come.

It was quite common for a player to move to another machine, when he found that his wasn't showing positive signs. Some players would begin their gambling session by putting money in two or three machines, and then choosing the one that appeared to be performing the best. This belief seems to have been reinforced by an Atlantic Lottery Corporation repair man who had told some of the players that a machine that is going to pay out will start giving out wins on the first five or ten dollar investment, whereas those machines that aren't going to pay won't show any signs of life at all.

6.3.3.2 KNOWING THE HISTORY OF EACH MACHINE

Most players held the belief that each machine operated independently of all others. It was widely accepted that knowing the net sum that each machine had taken in or paid out would give the player an indication of which one offered the best chance of winning. Those that were up a lot of money were believed to be "*due to pay*." A variety of strategies were employed in an effort to get this information. The most common was to ask the bartenders, who had the supposed advantage of seeing the receipts that the machines printed out at the end of each day.⁸¹ Another strategy for obtaining information about the machines was to communicate with other players who had been in the bar for a longer period of time, and would have observed any major wins or losses. For the most part, this information was shared willingly, particularly among regular players. A

⁸¹VLTs in Newfoundland automatically shut down at 2 AM (last call), and turn on again at 9 AM.

third technique was to stay in the bar and study the machines for an extended period of time to get a sense of which one offered the best prospect.

Despite these efforts, most players acknowledged that some machines just didn't follow the pattern.

The games that are up a lot of money usually pay the bells, but I've seen a game go for a month and not pay out. She was way up. I find that generally, the ones that are up pay more, but sometimes Atlantic Lottery tries to trick people. Some weeks there is one machine that continuously pays while two other machines suck money in to cover for the other one.

If a machine hasn't paid in a week, its more likely to pay whereas a machine that has just paid out a lot is unlikely to do it again. They tend to balance out over a period of time. Now, of course, one machine may pay out three times in one day while another one might go upwards of two or three weeks without paying out at all.

Another 'skill' linked to the belief that the machines operated independently was to change machines after receiving a big payout. Most believed that the same machine was unlikely to pay out a second time, though most offered evidence that this unusual occurrence had happened before.

Once, I had the bells roll out twice in ten minutes. After I hit them the first time, I wanted to wait and see if any sevens would roll around and sure enough they did. After a while, I noticed that the bonus was up pretty high, so I stuck around for that, and sure enough, the bells came down again.

These exceptions to the rule created questions in the minds of many players, though few were willing to take the chance of playing a machine that was known to hold a deficit.

6.3.3.3 UNDERSTANDING 'THE PATTERNS'

Some players believed that, in playing the machines over a prolonged period of time, they had come to recognize patterns in the combinations of symbols that the game produced. Certain

combinations were regarded by players as signs that a big win was near or, alternatively, that the machine was not going to pay anymore, and it was best to change to another one.

Often, knowledge of the patterns was sighted by regular players as their reason for continuing to play, despite sustained losses. Some expressed the belief that they were only now beginning to understand the patterns, and quitting would mean that they wouldn't have the chance to exploit this knowledge. Insights into the workings of the machines were regarded by these players as the reward of experience.

Winning is mostly luck, but it seems to me that the more you play, the more patterns register. You try certain things and, sooner or later, you catch on. So there's a bit of skill involved that way. But those things are set up to make it very hard to catch on to all of the different patterns. But there are some that they keep putting through there all the time. If you play enough, you know that if this and this and this comes down, that's coming next. If you're observant, experience pays off. It's only natural, I guess that the more you play the games, the more you see the same patterns. You do see the same ones a lot of the time. If you see something that gives you a good idea that something good is coming, you'll put the bet up on max. There's people like that, they can remember exactly where everything is to.

Some of the less experienced players had not observed these patterns for themselves but took the word of the Gamblers that patterns did indeed exist.

I believe what they say about patterns, though I haven't seen any myself. I really don't understand the machines. A lot of people understands more than I do because they're into it all day long. In order to know about those machines, you've got to be playing them a good bit. And here's one who's not going at it. I work too hard for my money.

Though there seemed to be a considerable amount of variation in the kinds of patterns that players claimed to have picked up on, certain themes were common throughout. Perhaps the most widely shared belief was that a lot of oranges, or a row of oranges across the middle of the screen, was an indication that the bells would soon come. Though two bartenders said that this belief was

far less popular than it once was, I found it to be shared by people across a wide geographic area which encompassed several bars. More recently, watermelons had come to replace oranges in the minds of many players as the sign that good things lay ahead. Certain symbols in the middle square of the screen, usually a cherry or a seven, were taken as signs that the machine would not pay anymore.

Another common belief was that a large concentration of bells in a number of successive patterns was an indication that the swinging bells would soon come down. This was especially true in situations where the player hit a pattern which was just off of the swinging bells. These near misses were usually regarded as an indication that the machine “*wants to give the bells.*” Others thought the bells were more likely to come when very few bells were appearing. Some of these players rationalized that the machine was saving its bells up for the swinging bells.

The routine failures of these patterns to produce their expected results created an epistemological problem for many players. Believers in the patterns theory generally discounted these as anomalous occurrences, designed by the programmers of the games to throw players off the trail.

Sometimes, you see a lot of bells or a lot of fruit, and you know that you're going to get them, but then again, sometimes the game just does that so you'll be screwed up and put more money in to try to win.

Others interpreted these events as evidence that pattern theories were merely constructions of people's minds.

In reality, you don't know what's coming next but you come to think you do. You always see a pattern. Everybody thinks they've got it. We all have ideas about how the machines are run. We all think we know the patterns but it doesn't always work that way. It's hardest to stop when you have got yourself convinced that they are coming.

6.3.3.4 DEVELOPING A SOUND BETTING STRATEGY

Many players cited the importance of changing one's bet around frequently in yielding improved results. Some people believed that the machine would only pay out on a pre-specified bet. These players tried to go through as many bets as possible, until they found the one that appeared to be paying out the most. One player described this strategy as follows:

I think the games will only give on the bet they want to give on. I believe they are going to give the bells on a certain number. It's the same with the bonus. I try to hit most of the bets. Once you hit a certain number where its showing a lot of fruit, you know it wants to give the bonus.

Some players held the belief that either exceptionally high or low bets were more likely to pay out than were mid range bets. Some thought that it was those that could afford to bet higher that tended to come out ahead. "*Money follows money*" one player told me. "*The odds go way up when you bet high.*" Others noted that one advantage of betting less than eight credits (\$0.40) was that the machine tended to give out more sevens. The players that subscribed to this belief argued that, because the machine had to pay out much smaller amounts on low bets and did not risk paying out the bonus, the odds of winning on these bets increased dramatically. Some believed that one effective trick was to bet low until more sevens started to appear and then put their bets up to fifty, in the hopes that the sevens would continue.

6.3.3.5 STOPPING THE WHEELS AT THE RIGHT TIME

Many players believed that learning to stop the wheels at the right time increased their likelihood of getting a big win. "*Stoppers*" can be broken down into two main groups. The first group believed that it was best to wait for part of a pattern to emerge (i.e. three bells across the middle of the screen) and then to stop the wheels at exactly the right second. The second group

simply stopped the wheels immediately, before any pattern emerged. Though, this latter strategy had the potential to use up credits very quickly, its followers believed that it was a more effective way to play the machines, because it brought an improvement in their likelihood of winning which outweighed the risk of losing their money quickly.

Some Stoppers had come to believe that stopping didn't help their chances, but found that they were so used to their habit that they had difficulty changing their style.

Sometimes I think I play wrong because I don't let it roll out. I have to be right jiggy with it, stopping it and all. I don't have the patience to let it run out. The rollers may not win as much, but their money lasts longer. I go through my money twice as fast. I've tried to let it roll, but I just can't.

This attachment to the feeling of control brought by stopping made many Stoppers much less fond of the types of slot machines offered at most casinos, which did not offer the stopping feature.

Several stoppers told me that they had tried slot machines, but had found them boring by comparison.

I was at a casino last year and I played the slots. I didn't like that at all. It was all chance. All you do is pull the handle. With video lottery, you feel like there is some skill involved. It might never be, but it feels like you are beating the game.

In opposition to the stoppers were the 'Rollers.' Rollers did not tend to believe that stopping the wheels increased their chances of winning. Thus, they felt that the best strategy was to let the wheels roll out on their own, because this would maximize the amount of time taken for each spin, and ensure them of a longer session.

If you're there to enjoy yourself, you should let it roll because money lasts longer. When the time comes to get them bells, they come.

Some of the Rollers did believe that stopping increased the likelihood of a big win, but preferred the consistency of letting the wheels roll out on their own. As one player explained:

If you are constantly stopping them, your credits go pretty fast, whereas if you let them roll out, it takes a lot longer, so your credits last twice as long. Actually, I would say that the Stoppers do win a little more, maybe 55: 45 but when they lose, they lose quickly.

6.3.3.6 MISCELLANEOUS SKILLS

Some players drew upon other 'skills,' which cannot be subsumed under the above categories. These skills tended to be much less popular, however. One technique was to switch over to the poker game for a few spins and then go back to the swinging bells game. A few people believed that this could "fool up the game," and might "turn bad luck into good luck." Others believed that listening to the internal sounds of the game could help. A number of players pointed out that the machines occasionally made a clicking (otherwise described as a squeaking) noise. Most thought that if the player was winning when they heard the noises, it was best to stop playing, because the machine would not pay out anymore. Finally, some believed that the speed at which the wheels were spinning was an indication of whether they were ready to pay or not. Some said fast spinning was a good sign, while others believed that slow spinning was better. Still others attributed these variations in spinning speed to power surges, and paid little attention to them.

6.3.4 THE UNCERTAINTY OF SKILLS

Though the vast majority of players exhibited at least some type of skill orientation, most were uncertain about whether or not their efforts to influence the outcome of the game had any effect at all. For the most part, it was accepted that it was the machine that ultimately determined whether or not they would come out on top. Players employed 'skills' in the hope that they might help to tip the balance, even slightly, in their favour. In some cases players claimed that they felt confident that their skills were only illusory, but they continued to practice them anyway, just in

case they did work. These lingering doubts are apparent in these passages taken from two gamblers who were attempting to explain their beliefs about whether or not skill had any bearing on the outcome of the game.

I tries to do everything to shag the computer up, but I don't think there's any shagging her up sometimes.

It gives you the feeling that you have some control even though you don't. Most people think they can control the games. They'll probably all end up in the mental one of these days.⁴² You can't control them. There's no way to. You can do whatever you like — stand, kneel, pray, do anything. You're not controlling them, they're controlling you.

Despite these doubts, most stayed true to their 'skills,' in the hopes that they would pay off in the long run.

Though VLTs may offer 'low-skill,' or even 'no-skill' games by comparison to most other forms of gambling, there was a clear tendency for players to impose their skill beliefs onto the machines. These beliefs are clearly encouraged by VLT manufacturers, who have introduced a variety of features which give players the sense that they are manipulating the outcome of the games. In the case of the Swinging Bells machines, the two most significant features are the provision of a stop button, and the allowing of players to change bets between spins rather than forcing them to stay with a fixed bet. As a result, players find themselves engaged in a continuous decision making process. With each spin, they must choose whether to change their bet or leave it as it is and whether or not to stop the wheels from spinning. If they do choose to stop it, they must decided on which moment to stop it. Whether any of these actions actually have an impact on the outcome of the game is unclear. The mere belief that they do, however, serves to keep

⁴²The term '*the mental*' refers to a psychiatric treatment facility.

players deeply involved in the play of the game on a second to second basis.

6.4 WHEN SKILLS GO AWRY: STRATEGIES FOR BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE

Even the most successful players could site situations in which their best efforts to understand the machines had failed them. When 'skills' did not live up to expectations, players were forced to come up with new ways of manipulating the machines in order to preserve the feeling that they were actively involved in the game's outcome. This section explores two of the most common ways in which this was accomplished: the courtship of luck, and verbal and/or physical interactions with the machine itself.

6.4.1 LUCK

Juxtaposed against skill beliefs were beliefs about luck. Though many felt that skill had a bearing on the outcome of the game, other explanations needed to be produced when things did not go according to plan. Beliefs and rituals relating to luck were commonly evoked to bridge this epistemological gap. This appears to fit with Bronislaw Malinowski's (1992) argument that ritual magic is most commonly found in dangerous or uncertain situations.

Most often, luck was discussed was in reference to lucky players. A player was deemed to be "*having a run of luck*" if he was having a particularly successful day, but was only thought to "*be lucky*" if he appeared to win more than most others on a consistent basis. For the most part, that these players were more fortunate than their peers was simply accepted as an incomprehensible fact of life. One player commented:

Nobody says that winners are skilled people. Skills only keep your losses under control. Wins are lucky. Some people do win more. I don't know if its just that certain people are born lucky or what. I've known people all my life who always seemed to draw the longest straw.

A lot of people, by luck or by coincidence or by intelligence, perhaps, seem to hit the bells more. I don't know whether it's something they learned by playing them or what? Still, it's more luck than anything. The know-how won't do you any good if you don't have the luck.

In most cases, the players thought to be the luckiest were people who played fairly often. Though a few of these players admitted to being unusually fortunate, most dismissed the opinions of others, arguing that they only won more often only because they played more often. One of the players reputed to be among the luckiest explained:

A lot of people tell me I win more than most, but they don't realize that if I don't put it back in tonight, I will tomorrow. I tell them that it's a no win situation. If you win today, you'll lose it another day. You're not winning. You may think you are but you're not. Maybe some walk away when they win, but I haven't seen too many leave it for long.

A second type of luck that was spoken of related to lucky rituals. Though most admitted to practising some kind of lucky ritual in private interviews, very few players talked publicly about the specific rituals that they employed. One of the only widely shared lucky rituals centred around the process of “*rubbing*.” This took on a variety of forms. Most commonly, players would rub the machine, usually the screen. Sometimes players would simply use their hand, but more commonly, they would rub money on it. Alternatively, some would “*get a rub*” off of a lucky player. Touching was regarded by many as a way of transferring luck from one player to another.⁸³ This appears to be a manifestation of what Sir James Frazer called “contagious magic”

⁸³Both Louis Chiaramonte (1999) and Thomas F. Nemec (1999b) have found that a belief in the contagiousness of luck is apparent in several Newfoundland outports. This extends far beyond the realm of gambling, into other aspects of daily life. Each observed a variety of lucky rubbing practices during their fieldwork terms, on the ‘South Coast’ of Newfoundland, and the ‘Southern Shore’ of the Avalon Peninsula, respectively. Most commonly, rubbing was applied to fishing or hunting, but it extended into other realms of life as well.

(1911: 272). Though most of the interviewees dismissed rubbing as superstition, this skepticism did not deter many of them from participating in the ritual.

The only person to routinely display her personal lucky rituals in public was a single woman in her early thirties. Over the course of a session of playing, she would routinely get off of her stool and walk around it before resuming her game. This, she believed, had the power to change her luck if it had gone bad. She also admitted that any time her right hand became itchy, she took it as a sign that she should play, and made it to the club as fast as she could. Finally, she employed a host of lucky charms, including: a small rubber troll figurine (imported from her bingo playing days), a lucky leather key chain, and a lucky bracelet which featured a picture of the Virgin Mary.

Some other players also admitted to having lucky charms which they carried with them when they played. These included: paper talismans, pieces of silver and silver coloured coins. For the most part, however, these items were kept out of the public view. Certain players regarded specific articles of clothing as lucky. Still others had a lucky machine which they would always play if at all possible. Lastly, some would only play at certain times of day, or at certain locations, because they had enjoyed unusual success under those circumstances and didn't want to alter their formula.

6.4.2 VERBAL AND PHYSICAL INTERACTIONS WITH VLTs

In addition to applying 'skills' and courting 'luck,' some players engaged in more direct forms of interaction with the machine, such as talking to it or manipulating it physically. Though only a few said that they believed that such tactics actually improved their chances of winning, most confessed to experimenting with them, when all else failed. Others said that they engaged in

these behaviours for other reasons, such as social acceptance or pent-up anger. These interactions usually took one of two forms. The first consisted of what might be called positive reinforcement: stroking, caressing, and talking softly to the machines, while the latter involved negative reinforcement: cursing and overt acts of physical violence against the machine.

6.4.2.1 METHODS OF ENCOURAGEMENT: “SWEET TALKING” AND “RUBBING DOWN”

Some players had taken to talking affectionately to the machines as they played. This was usually done in situations where the player was trying to improve her fortune, or to preserve a run of good fortune that she was already experiencing. Most commonly, the machines were referred to by names that might otherwise be used to describe a loved one, such as lovey, sweetie, honey, baby, and ducky. Most local people had come to refer to this type of behaviour as “*sweet talking*.” A few players had given “*pet names*” to one or more machines, and would routinely use these names in addressing the machines as they played. Some had also taken to gently stroking the machines, or “*rubbing them down*” as they spoke. As one bartender remarked:

When she's giving you lots of credits, or you're trying to get her going, its honey, sweetie, or whatever. You see people sweet talkin' em and rubbin' em down and everything. 'C'mon baby, one more!'

Though sweet talking and rubbing down were engaged in by many of the players at some time or another, most suggested that this behaviour was much more commonly associated with women than with men.

Closely related to sweet talking was a kind of conjuring practice which had become known as “*calling the sevens*.” One man, who was widely considered to be the pioneer of the tactic, explained:

I call the sevens an awful lot, right? I say, 'Come on sevens!', 'and she'll give me one. So I'll say, 'Give me another one!', 'and she'll give me one more. And I'll say, 'One more!', '...And I'm after noticing about twenty local people doing the same thing since they've been hanging around with me. Some ask me to come over and do it for them, because they don't think they can do it as well as I can. People think it's a gas when I get a lot of them. I had them all except for one one day.

Calling the sevens, and other forms of conjuring, had gathered a great deal of popularity among many of the local players. Though most referred to them as ways of making the games more fun, two players said that they thought that calling the sevens might actually improve their luck.

6.4.2.2 REACTIONS OF FRUSTRATION: CURSING AND PHYSICAL VIOLENCE

At the opposite end of the spectrum were reactions of frustration and anger. It was not uncommon for certain players to react in openly hostile ways toward their machines when they were not performing to their liking. Some players seemed to harbour an almost personal antagonism toward the machines. A few players said that they felt such animosity toward them that they were almost as happy to see others winning as they were to win themselves. One player said that each time that somebody beat the machine and scored a big win, it felt like a bit of revenge for the many occasions that he had lost too much money into the machines. He added:

I like to see people breaking the games. The more they can take the games for, the better. I want them to take them for everything they've got. I'd like them to clean them out. It's probably impossible but I'd love to see it.

Perhaps because those occasions where players did come out ahead were so rare, some would occasionally turn to other methods of getting their revenge. The most common reaction was to bombard the machine with insults and profanities. The nature of the insulting dialogue seemed to vary considerably between players, particularly between male and female players. Whereas women tended to choose gender-neutral terms such as: “damn thing,” “blood of a bitch” or “fucker,” most men were

apt to personify the VLTs as women. Certain men would routinely use derogatory terms, such as “bitch,” “slut,” or “whore” to describe the machines. One woman, who played regularly, observed:

I have heard variations on the same theme: fucking whore. It's a she, it's definitely a she. Anything that doesn't work right is a she. That's the tradition around here. Everything that doesn't work right has got to be feminine. It's all she, she, she. She's a whore, she's a slut, she's a bitch. You have to kick her. Yes, I hear nobody saying it's a bastard. No, the only male name I hear them say is son of a bitch. Usually, though, it's 'you god damn cock-sucking...' It's horrible to have to listen to that kind of abuse.⁸⁴

She hypothesized that these attitudes were probably indicative of an underlying misogyny, which likely surfaced in the home lives of these players as well.

It really bothers me that I hear this treatment of the female gender so openly and publicly accepted. It's disgusting. Like, because ten to one these people are doing the same thing in their homes to their children, to their wives. Women doing it to their children and men doing it to their children. It's horrible!

One of the men who was known as one of the greatest perpetrators of this kind of language dismissed these claims by saying:

It depends on your mood and who is around you. You try to hold back on the cursing if you know that there is somebody there that would not appreciate it. But if you're there with a good bunch of people who are there for a party, well people just get a laugh out of someone talking that way to the machines. Hey don't get me wrong, a lot of times I get really pissed off with it and blurt out some really nasty ones, but usually it's just a bit of carrying on.

The discrepancy in the ways in which these two persons interpreted the same behaviour suggests that a player's subjective stance helps to determine what they regard as acceptable ways of interacting with the machines.

A second form of outburst was overt violence against the machines. The most common

⁸⁴Indeed, I found that the term ‘she’ was commonly used by both men and women to describe cars, boats, and most other machinery.

expression of violence was to simply kick the large black box at the base of the machine. This technique was common to both men and women alike. Most often, these kicks were simply symbolic gestures. Three separate women who admitted to kicking the machines said that they only did this to fit in with the other players. One remarked:

Women are the same thing. I smack it. Just because I want to fit in with the crowd. I've kicked it and I've smacked the play button to pretend that I'm pissed off with it.

A very small minority of players said that they believed that lightly kicking the machine could actually prompt it to pay out. One person explained: “I figure that if you give them a good kick, they'll usually give you something back.” She routinely kicked the machine throughout her session, and often encouraged others to do the same.

Certain players had taken to hitting the machines much harder than others. Some had become known for punching and kicking them as hard as they could. Interestingly, these players shared a number of other characteristics as well. Almost all were men, with a couple of notable exceptions. Five of the most violent men were recent divorcees. Also, all made a habit of consuming alcohol while they played, often in large quantities. Those that I interviewed indicated that their most extreme outbursts of violence had been during periods of particularly extreme drunkenness. In one case, a man had actually broken his toe kicking a machine. Other tactics that I witnessed included: shaking the machine violently, slamming one's fist down on the play buttons, lifting the machine up on one end and dropping it back down, and punching the screen. One man explained:

I've hit them. I'm surprised I'm not after breaking one. I wouldn't want to hit a person as hard as I've hit them.

Another man who admitted to having hit the machines himself on a few occasions said:

A few times, I've seen people hit them so hard, I thought they'd break their fists. I can't describe the force with which they hit it. I've seen some guys practically driving their hands right through the glass.

One man actually tried to carry a machine out of the bar on one occasion, but was stopped before he got very far. Another man, who was known for hitting the machines, vowed that if he one day won the lottery, he would buy a mallet and go up and down the shore smashing every VLT he could find.

Despite the frequency of these violent attacks, very few of the VLTs had sustained serious damage. One man's fist had cracked a screen, and various machines had to have buttons replaced from time to time as the result of prolonged abuse. Otherwise, they had escaped unscathed. The resiliency of the VLTs had fostered a belief among many of the regulars that the machines were manufactured to take punishment. Some players seemed to feel that violence was an informally sanctioned means of deriving pleasure from the machines. Much like a punching bag, the machine was available for them to vent their frustrations on, in whatever way they saw fit.

For these players, violence appeared to be wholly an expression of frustration. Violent behaviour of this nature usually occurred in a fairly predictable set of situations. The most common situation was a near miss, especially when the player just missed getting the swinging bells. A second situation which sometimes provoked violence was a big loss. When the VLT took a player's last dollar, it was not uncommon for him to react with cursing or violence. Similarly, exceptionally fast losses sometimes brought on intense anger. One player described this experience by saying:

It's frustrating when you put your money in and you don't get a thing. In one minute it's over. That's when you really feel like kicking the game.

6.5 THE VLT AS A PROVIDER OF MEANING

Even if players can in fact do nothing to influence the outcomes of VLT games, believing that they can, or pretending that they believe that they can, may carry a variety of other advantages. Firstly, these beliefs, particularly those about skill, may provide a rationale for deep immersion in the game that would not be possible otherwise. This, in turn, may intensify the feelings of excitement, mental stimulation or relaxation that are sometimes associated with the games. One player suggested that VLTs were much like movies or television, in that the degree of pleasure derived from them was largely dependent on that person's capacity to suspend their disbelief and lose themselves in the experience. If players were to accept that there was no skill involved, immersion of this sort would appear ridiculous in the eyes of the others.

Another reason for the persistence of skill beliefs in the minds of many players, despite their inconsistent track records, is that they provide a kind of *raison d'être* for playing the machines. Although many players had suspicions about whether or not their efforts were working, most chose to believe that they were. Skill beliefs offered players a feeling of control which would not otherwise be possible. The importance of this sense of control in attracting players to the game was clearly described by one bartender/player:

People are attracted to the control. You have the choice of whether to stop them, and when to stop them. There is a little bit of excitement there. It's not like a Nevada ticket where you just peel off the bars.⁸⁵ There is the excitement of hoping and the disappointment of missing. You know, there's a little bit of action to it. Especially if you do win. Also, players can choose when to play and how much to bet and things like that. I think that gives them a feeling of control too.

Were these players to accept that they had no control over the outcome of the game whatsoever, it

⁸⁵Nevada tickets are another term for break-open tickets.

might lose a great deal of interest for them.

The varying ways in which Gamblers have learned to relate to the machines have also provided them with opportunities to carve out personal styles within the group. The uncertainties introduced by the specialized play features of VLTs allow players to gamble in a variety of idiosyncratic ways. Instead of being forced into a homogenous style, they may choose to be identified as low bettors, high bettors, 50 betters, erratic betters, rollers, slow stoppers, quick stoppers, sweet talkers, cursers, punchers, kickers, or any combination therein. This in turn, may provide them with an added sense of group identity, and increase the social rewards that they derive from playing the machines.

Finally, VLTs may provide a metaphor for other aspects of daily life. Some players took advantage of their time playing the machines to express feelings of anger, frustration, warmth, boredom, hopelessness, elation, or loneliness for which they may not have had other outlets. This last point corresponds closely with Mark Griffiths' (1991) argument that gambling machines often serve as 'electronic friends' or 'electronic foes,' allowing players to express themselves outwardly, without necessarily having to interact with other human beings.

Chapter Seven

LET'S BE ALONE TOGETHER: THE VLT AS A CALMING DEVICE

A number of players indicated that they regularly used the machines to calm themselves down when they were feeling psychologically burdened. One mother of three said that playing the machines never failed to take away her stress headaches. Another woman explained: *"It was like a total relaxation. It was like a high. It was like being in another world."* Though many players smoked cigarettes while playing, and some associated playing with drinking alcohol, or smoking marijuana, many players said that they usually played without using any additional mind-altering agents, whatsoever. Nonetheless, several of these persons said that they found the machines powerfully calming. This suggests that it is something intrinsic to the experience of playing VLTs that helps to bring on states of relaxation.

7.1 WHAT IS RELAXING ABOUT PLAYING VLTs?

The relaxing properties of VLTs seem to flow from three distinct dimensions of the playing experience. Firstly, the machines, with their constant motion, bright colours, lights, and sounds, may have an inherently hypnotic quality. In addition, VLTs provoke intense concentration, thereby distracting players and offering them temporary relief from other concerns. Lastly, playing the machines offered a rare socially acceptable opportunity to withdraw from social interaction and take time to oneself.

7.1.1 THE "SEDUCTIVE" APPEARANCE OF THE MACHINES

Several studies of players on electronic gambling machines have noted that the appearances of most VLTs are intended to lure players into states of intense relaxation. Fisher, in her study of

electronic gambling machine use in a UK amusement arcade, reported that the displays of the machines "...are visually exciting, with brightly lit displays in vivid primary colours, which are continually changing. Aurally too the machines are seductive, programmed to interact with players via a plethora of electronic melodies" (1993: 454). Other studies have argued that certain specific lighting and colour combinations are extremely attractive to many players (Caldwell 1972; Stark et al. 1982; Fisher and Griffiths 1995).

These perspectives may have some validity in the outport Newfoundland context as well. Though Fisher's fruit machines differ slightly from the VLTs used by the ALC, both sets of machines feature a bonanza of bright colours and sounds, and nearly continuous motion. When prompted, some of the players said that the visual and auditory stimulation they derived from playing was a major part of their attraction to the machines.

You could see some nice combinations coming up there, and she plays different music. There are all sorts of little interesting things that get you involved.

I was first attracted by the sounds. If there is no noise, you can hear them clicking and everything.

You gets hypnotized or something by the game. I really think it has that kind of effect on people. I don't know whether it's the colours or the motion or what.

Some of the most commonly cited sensory attractions included: the bright colours, the spinning of the wheels, the songs played after big wins, and visually appealing combinations of symbols. Two players said that they derived almost as much pleasure from watching others play as they did from playing themselves, because they could still have the satisfaction of watching the wheels spin and listening to the music and the other sounds emitted by the machines. One explained:

I'm really attracted to it. I could just sit back and watch someone else play it for hours. It's not the same as playing, but I enjoy it. It's so relaxing to watch it.

Several players added that the images and sounds of the VLTs often stayed with them well after they had left the bar.

Though the appeal of the aforementioned features should not be understated, I have come to believe that other aspects of play are even more important to the relaxation process for most players. Firstly, the concentration level that many players retain while playing is sufficiently high that they are unable to think about anything else while they play. This is relaxing because it enables them to temporarily distract themselves from distressful thoughts. The second factor is that the play of VLTs represents one of the only legitimate opportunities for people to escape their social obligation to interact with other people. Both together and separately, these dimensions of playing VLTs are used by some players to deal with stressful situations and calm themselves down.

7.1.2 CONCENTRATION AND DISTRACTION

As discussed in Chapter Six, many people thought that by carefully observing the sequence of patterns produced by the machines, players could sometimes predict a big win. These persons believed that playing the machines skilfully required tremendous attentiveness. Some players paid equally close attention to the machines in their efforts to stop the wheels at the perfect time.

While concentrating on these variables, most players found it impossible to think about anything else. Even those who did not subscribe to any skill beliefs were sometimes so distracted by their anticipation of the results that they were unable focus on any other thoughts. A few players made the point that, once they had become immersed in the machine, they would lose touch with their surroundings, and would often not notice when others talked to them.

When you're playing them and someone talks to you, you're just so interested in the machine that it doesn't even register.

Three players said that they had forgotten entire conversations that they had while playing the machines.

People would tell me they were talking to me the night before, and I wouldn't even remember talking to them. I would have no recollection whatsoever.

Several players added that when they got wrapped up in playing the machines they often felt that their sense of time was distorted. Twenty-one of the twenty-five interviewees (84%) reported playing for longer than they intended on one or more occasions in the past year, and ten (40%) said that they did this regularly. Five (20%) said that they had missed appointments because they were so wrapped up in playing that they lost track of time. This was especially common in situations where a player had amassed a lot of credits, and didn't have to stop to put more money into the machine for an extended period. One player, who confessed to routinely playing longer than she planned, explained:

What time. There is no time. Time is fleeting. I could go out there at twelve o'clock and then realize that it's five to two and it just feels like I'd been sitting there for five minutes, or five seconds. I'm often surprised to see darkness outside. I have even missed appointments and missed picking up my children from a school dance. I intend to go for only an hour, and four hours later I'm being phoned or picked up by my husband. It happens all the time. I don't even bother to look at the clock anymore, because I know that I just can't leave it.

It was fairly common to hear players use words like “hypnotic,” “trance-like,” and “mesmerizing” to describe the experience of playing.

7.1.2.1 VLT PLAYING AS “FLOW”

The capacity for intense concentration to produce feelings of tranquillity bears strong resemblance to Mikael Cziksentsmilhalyi's “flow” theory. In his book, Beyond Boredom and Anxiety (1975), Cziksentsmilhalyi argues that ‘true play’ exists in those situations where a player's

skills are pitched at exactly the challenge level of the tasks. If the task is too simple, it may become boring and lose its appeal. If it is too difficult, it may produce frustration and anxiousness. True play, he contends, has the power to produce a sense of “flow.” This is the sensation brought about by total immersion in the activity. The flow state produces a feeling of harmony with the activity. It may even produce an altered state of being in which players may lose track of time or lose touch with their physical surroundings.

Igor Kusyszyn (1984) has applied a flow-like concept to the study of gambling. He emphasized the capacity of the “ritualistic quality” of most forms of gambling to induce a “release from reality” (1984: 135). Gambling, he argued, has the potential to “transport the self into a play world, a fantasy world in which they stay suspended until being jarred back into reality by the finish of the last race or the disappearance of their money” (Ibid., 135).

The ‘flow’ concept may be of great use in explaining the calming power of concentrating on VLTs. By paying close attention to the patterns produced by the machine, a player may temporarily lose touch with his environment and achieve a flow state. The capacity of electronic gambling machines to produce a flow-like state in their players was also examined by Rob Lynch. Lynch argued that the main purpose for playing poker machines among middle-aged, working class Australians was to “switch off” for a few hours after a stressful day. Lynch claimed that for many, the play of poker machines is “both mentally active and inactive – thought provoking and thought deadening” (1990: 198). Thought deadening because it allows players to disengage from their surroundings and thought provoking because: “For some it is active experience, involving the use of the mind, attention to combinations, concentration, and an on-going chain of decisions” (Ibid., 198).

The 'flow state' brought forth by focussing deeply on the game gives some players a brief relief from the cause of their frustration and enables them to relax. In this sense, VLTs function as a mood changer for many players. As one gambler remarked:

You don't think about anything else but that machine. There's nothing else on your mind when you play. All your troubles disappear while you're playing... Gambling eases the pain. It calms you because it distracts you. It takes your attention away from your troubles and puts it onto the game.

Another said:

Thinking about the game clears my mind. It gets things out of my head. That's what the bells are to me now. They're just a hobby to take me away from the hustle and bustle and keep me from going over the edge.

One man drew a parallel between the role that VLTs now play in his life, and the role that alcohol used to play for him in relieving his mind of tension. He had recently gone through a divorce, and had been introduced to the machines by his friends as a way of cheering him up.

When you're unhappy, that's a good pastime. You go there to drown your sorrows, more or less. When you're playing, you just think about the games and not anything else. It clears your head and gets all your problems off your mind. It's like booze. Now, instead of going to the bottle, I take a shot of the machines.

Some players likened the distracting effect of VLTs to that brought by watching television, but most felt that watching TV did not serve this purpose as well because it did not allow for direct interaction. In Cziksentmihalyi's terms, it was not sufficiently challenging.

Some of the regular VLT players had grown accustomed to using the distracting quality of the game to help them to cope with a wide variety of emotional problems. Four players admitted to having been victims of physical or sexual abuse at some point in their lives. All four said that playing VLTs allowed them to rid themselves of memories of those experiences when they resurfaced. Others used the machines to calm themselves down after they had been in an argument

with their spouse or romantic partner. Some used them to avoid feelings of worthlessness brought on by prolonged unemployment or financial strain. Still others used them to cope with stress brought on by an unpleasant or overly demanding job. What remained constant throughout was that VLTs were viewed by all of these players as one of the most reliable ways of altering one's state of mind when a distraction was needed.

The flow concept may also help to explain the reluctance of some players to talk to others while they were playing. Although many of the Gamblers had come to know each other through playing the machines, conversation during play was quite sparse.⁸⁶ As one regular remarked: *"We have a certain time where we talk, but then we have to get down to business."* A number of players said that they actively disliked talking to others while they were playing. Some would even leave the machines for a while, if their neighbour was too talkative for their liking. In their efforts to avoid distractions, some of the Gamblers would try to limit their playing to the afternoons when the club was relatively empty, and would go out of their way to avoid nights and weekends when it was taken over by a *"rowdy drinking crowd."*

When I'm playing them, the one thing I don't like is someone behind me. I prefer it when it's quiet. When I do play them, I like it to be quiet. I can play the machines and not know anyone is around as long as there's not too much noise. I hate it when people distract me. It's just as well to not play them. Now with regards to the music, that don't bother me. I just don't like it when people ball and blare and that kind of stuff. I especially don't like it when the drinkers are there, because they never shut up.

Part of the reason that these players hated being talked to while they played was that any distraction had the potential to interrupt their flow state. Though some players were able to *"tune*

⁸⁶There were, of course, several exceptions to this general rule. Some of the players were always content to talk to others while they played. Most people were quite selective about which occasions were suitable for conversation and which were not, however.

out” voices while they were playing, others said that they found that even small interruptions could cause them to lose touch with their blissful state of relaxation. Some said that they often found it difficult to recapture this state once it had been lost. In addition to unwanted conversations, there were a number of other events that seemed to have the capacity to break a player’s flow state.

Some players commented that it often broke their concentration when one of the other gamblers entered the club. The greetings that often accompanied these moments made it difficult to continue playing with the same intensity. Similarly, flow states were sometimes lost when another player got a big win, or acted out violently, thereby capturing the attention of the other patrons.

A player could also be jolted from a flow state when she hit the bells herself, and had to accept the congratulations of others. Though most were happy in these instances, one player said that she didn’t like hitting the bells. Instead, she preferred it when she was able to preserve her state of relaxation for as long as possible, without interruption.

Other instances in which flow states were broken came about when players had to leave the machine to go to the bathroom or when they ran out of money, and had to change up large bills or VLT pay slips at the bar. The number of interruptions of the latter type had been lessened considerably by the addition of automatic bill acceptors to the machines in 1997, however. In previous years, players could only insert coins into the machines. This made for much more frequent stoppages in play. The new machines allowed players to insert five, ten, twenty and fifty dollar bills into the machines.⁸⁷ This made it easy for them to easily build up their bank of credits

⁸⁷ Swinging Bells machines will accept fifty dollar bills, though they advertise that they will only accept as high as twenty. One intrepid Gambler had experimented with a fifty dollar bill, and found that it was accepted. The machines also accept one and two dollar coins and quarters.

to a sufficiently high level that they could go through a long series of wins and losses without having to stop to put in more money, or go to the bar to get change.

7.1.3 THE DESIRE FOR SOLITUDE

Most Newfoundland fishing communities were settled under economic conditions which demanded tremendous cooperation between people. The labour intensiveness of the inshore fishery, coupled with a harsh climate and limited fuel for heating, demanded that large groups of people grow accustomed to living in close quarters with each other. Even after the transition to fish plants, most jobs in the area continued to be group oriented. As Gerald Pocius has argued of the residents of Calvert, Newfoundland, people "...continue to both live and work next to one another -- kept close by values that have been important for a number of generations: values that emphasize proximity over privacy, hospitality over seclusion" (1991: 155). The architectural landscapes of most outports on the Barren Shore stand as living testaments to these values. In most cases, houses are clustered closely together, often despite an abundance of unused space in seemingly desirable locations.

To this day, few people elect to live alone. Many residents continue to reside on streets that bear their surnames, with extended family within shouting distance. Those that have not married typically reside with relatives or friends, or at least spend a considerable amount of their time at other people's homes. Similarly, elderly people are often taken in by one of their children's families once all of their offspring have moved out of the house.

The strong value placed on togetherness on the Barren Shore has nurtured a social climate in which solitude of any kind is quite rare. People who exhibit an unusual degree of fondness for their own company may be viewed with an aura of suspicion by other members of the community.

I learned this the hard way, after my initial house-mate moved away, leaving me alone to occupy a two bedroom dwelling. Almost immediately, people began to express concern that I might be lonely living all by myself. I was treated to endless visits from neighbours and friends to make sure that all was okay, and was offered a permanent bed by several families. When I explained that I was an only child who enjoyed spending time alone, and that the nature of my work called for me to do a great deal of work in seclusion, most people grudgingly accepted my decision. Many, however, appeared puzzled at why I would choose a vocation that required me to work under such undesirable conditions.

Despite the clear cultural preference for group activities, several of the regular gamblers explained to me that they occasionally yearned for time to themselves. Many of these people lived with their romantic partners, children, extended family, neighbours, friends, and/or co-workers around them the vast majority of the time. Some voiced frustration with the difficulty they had in finding “*just a moment of peace and quiet*,” to calm down and regroup themselves. VLTs provided a unique opportunity for people to take time of this nature, because they represented a relatively socially legitimate way of avoiding social interaction for a while.

The beauty of the machines was that they provided an environment in which the players could be among other people without feeling an obligation to talk to them. For the most part, it was acceptable for players to avoid conversation while playing, with the justification that they were too wrapped up in the action of the game to pay attention. This feature of VLTs has also been observed by Lynch (1990), and by Fisher (1993), who argued that a major appeal of fruit machines was that: “Playing the machines allows for an opportunity to be among people without the need for intimate social interaction” (1993: 470).

Remaining in the company of others held a number of important advantages. Firstly, it allowed people to take the downtime they desired without withdrawing from public view. This way, their absence would not arouse suspicion among others in the community. People that routinely go off on their own may find themselves the targets of gossip about the nature of their activities. They could be accused of adultery, drug addiction, or other anti-social forms of behaviour. By ensuring that their actions are always witnessed by others, players can avoid this threat.

A second advantage of staying around others is that it allows people to avoid the feelings of anxiety which can be brought on by complete solitude. Two regular players indicated that they didn't like to be completely alone, because it made them uncomfortable. VLTs were appealing to these people, because they allowed them to feel alone without actually having to be alone.

Yet another advantage of going to the club to escape is that it allows players to get away from persons, or situations, that they may be trying to avoid. This may take a number of forms. The most common manifestation was for people to use VLT gambling as a way of getting away from their children or from an angry spouse or romantic partner. One woman had taken to gambling whenever her husband began to drink heavily, because she knew that he had both verbally and physically abusive tendencies when he was drunk. By going to a public place, she could be sure that he would not pursue her. This allowed her a measure of protection which she could not find anywhere else. She could remain at the club until he had gone to sleep or, alternatively, she might be able to obtain an alternate place to stay through one of her gambling friends. Another player had taken to gambling during the tumultuous last months of his marriage, after he had become aware of the fact that his wife was having an affair. The couple shared the

ownership of their house and had two young children, making an immediate separation impossible. By going straight to the club after work, he managed to see as little of her as possible until they could arrange for a formal separation. He said:

I had to get away from my wife. I had to do my best to keep my cool until we could work something out that wouldn't hurt the kids too badly. But I just didn't want to go home. By going to the club, I could kill as much time as I wanted.

Playing the machines often served a dual purpose in these situations. It both allowed the player to be physically extricated from the problem, and helped to take his mind off of the unhappiness stirred up by the scene that he was fleeing from. One young woman explained:

There have been times when I had a fight with my boyfriend, and I'd take off to the club to play the game and have a couple of beers. It gives you a chance to get away. Also, I guess when you go to play, you're not exactly thinking about the argument you just had, or whatever. You're playing the game now.

Chapter Eight

FLIGHTS OF FANCY: FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO OVERSPENDING

Many of the Gamblers offered clear descriptions of the ways that they believed VLTs should be played in order to derive enjoyment from the game without incurring heavy financial losses. Most of these strategies involved setting aside a fixed stake, generally between fifteen and thirty dollars per session, and playing until the stake had been fully depleted, or until they had won enough to justify stopping. As one player proclaimed:

You've got to have the will power to put twenty dollars in, and if you don't win, fine. I've got twenty dollars gone. I'll just go home.

In practice, however, few were able to stick to this strategy consistently. Though twenty-one of the twenty-five interviewees (84%) said that they always came to the club with a clear idea of how much they wanted to spend, all twenty-five (100%) said they had spent more than they intended on at least one occasion in the past year, and eighteen (72%) had spent more than they intended overall in the past year. Eight players (32%) spoke of at least one occasion where they had gone to the club with an unusually large sum of money, such as a paycheck, an income tax refund or money for bill payments, on their person, and accidentally spent it all.⁸⁸

The tendencies of so many Gamblers to spend more than they initially planned to seems to be related to difficulties that many experienced in stopping their session once they had begun. I found that six players (24%) said that they always had trouble stopping themselves and another seventeen (68%) said they sometimes had trouble. Many of these players regularly talked about

⁸⁸Of these eight players, seven were men.

wanting to leave the machines well in advance of their actual time of departure. Only two players (8%) said that they were always able to stop when they wanted to.

The most commonly cited reason for eventually stopping was the exhaustion of all of the funds that the player had on his person.⁸⁹ Most bartenders confirmed these results. I was told repeatedly that only a small proportion of all players routinely left the bar with money after a win, and that it was almost always the same ones that did. As one Gambler explained:

Everyone goes with the intention of not spending very much, but you end up spending what you have in your pocket. You go over your limit. Basically everyone I talk to is going through the same thing.

8.1 IMPAIRED CONTROL AND OVERSPENDING

Mark Dickerson has explored the difficulties that many gambling machine players experience in keeping their spending under control. He classifies these difficulties under the label “impaired control,” which he defines as: “...the ways in which a person’s gambling does not match some preferred standard, and/or an awareness that even with effort, such a standard cannot consistently be achieved” (1993: 7). Dickerson, in his studies of gambling machines players, has concluded that the practice of playing beyond anticipated levels is common to players at all degrees of involvement. He writes: “It seems reasonable to conclude that it is relatively common for players to sense that their slots playing behaviour is out of control on occasions” (1996: 161).

I believe that the term ‘impaired control’ does not fully account for those situations in which excessive spending is a conscious and deliberate response to previously unforeseen circumstances. As an alternative, I will use the term ‘overspending’ to describe those situations in

⁸⁹Twenty-one players (84%) said that running out of money was their primary reason for stopping.

which gambling expenditures do not correspond with preferred standards. In the sections that follow, I will identify some of the factors that account for the tendencies of many of the Gamblers on the Barren Shore toward overspending.

8.1.1 DEEP IMMERSION IN THE EXPERIENCE OF PLAY

One of the main reasons cited by Gamblers for their overspending was that they often became so transfixed by the game that they didn't notice how much they were spending. For the most part, these players were those who cited relaxation or excitement as one of their primary motivations for playing. Several of these persons said that while they were playing, money did not feel like it had the same meaning as it did in everyday life. It simply felt like "*fuel* for the game."⁹⁰ What mattered most to them at the time was preserving the state of deep concentration, flow, or excitement for as long as possible. It was only upon leaving the bar that they became aware of how much they had spent. One man summarized his overspending experiences by saying:

I've often been to a club to play with a hundred dollars in my pocket. Then after while you go to look in your pocket and it's all gone, and you have no idea how you spent it so fast. You don't realize how much you're spending. You're not counting your money, you don't care. I can go into a bar and spend every cent. If I had five hundred dollars, I probably spend it. I wouldn't get up until it was all gone...The highest I've ever spent was \$600 dollars. I just sat there for an hour afterwards. I didn't want to leave. I was just saying, 'What am I after doing? I got bills to pay out of this.'

8.1.1.1 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUTOMATIC BILL ACCEPTORS AND OVERSPENDING

Many players stated that their occasions of overspending had become much more common

⁹⁰The illusion that money spent into the VLT does not have the same value as money spent on other goods and services may be enhanced by the fact that VLTs display dollar values in terms of five cent credits, rather than dollars and cents. Thus, some players may feel as though they are winning and losing credits rather than 'real' money.

since 1997. That year, the government introduced a new set of Swinging Bells machines, which featured automatic bill acceptors. Most said that this change made it much harder to keep track of how much they were spending. Several people told me that when they had to put in coins, they were forced to pause every few minutes to insert more money. This kept them from becoming too wrapped up in the game. The bill acceptor made stoppages in play far less frequent, and this made it much easier to lose track of time and money. This is evident in the following passages:

My biggest problem was when they changed over to these new machines. When they took loonies and quarters, it was much easier. To lose a dollar at a time is not as bad as losing five at a time. Now the money goes faster. It's more time consuming to put loonies in, so you're more conscious of what you are spending. Now nobody knows how much they're spending, so they probably put a little more in.

Now the bloody machines take up to a twenty dollar bill. Before you had to stop more and go up to the bar to change money. Before they took the bills, it was easier to keep track, but now it's impossible. Now it's too easy. People just keep saying 'five more' and all of a sudden, they've got fifty dollars gone.

Another result of the installation of the bill acceptors was that many players seemed to be willing to bet higher than they did before. A number of bartenders informed me that since the new machines had come in, most people were regularly betting much larger amounts.

Before, most people bet between eight and fifteen (\$0.40 to \$0.75), but since they started taking bills, a lot of people generally bet fifteen and up (\$0.75 cents to \$2.50 per spin).

I think people are betting higher than before. People are willing to try the thirties and forties (\$1.50 to \$2.50 per spin) now. I think the automatic bill receiver is a big reason for that.

The perceptions of players appear to be substantiated by the striking rise in the revenues yielded by VLTs in the province after the addition of bill acceptors. As Table 1.1 shows, between the 1996-1997 fiscal year and the 1998-1999 fiscal year, annual net VLT sales in Newfoundland

and Labrador climbed from \$60.8 million to \$84.5 million. This is a rise of thirty-nine percent in two years. While more research is needed in order to fully understand the sharp increase, the addition of bill acceptors to machines across the province at the onset of this period was very likely a major contributor.

A nationally televised documentary about gambling had informed a number of players that machines were being manufactured for the Las Vegas market which would accept debit cards directly, as well as cash. This feature would enable people to play with money taken straight from their savings accounts. Two players took it upon themselves to speak out about the potential problems that these machines could bring, were they to be embraced by the ALC.

If they bring in the Cashstop machines, people will play until everything is gone.⁹¹ I know people will do it.

If they bring those machines that take bank cards into this province, we're all doomed.

8.1.2 SITUATIONAL PRESSURES

8.1.2.1 EFFORTS TO BREAK EVEN/PLAYING FROM BEHIND

One of the most common overspending scenarios occurred when players suffered a loss, and then exceeded their budget in an effort to recoup their money. Though some theorists have argued that this strategy is a recipe for disaster, Hayano (1982) has pointed out that it may be a rational course of action in some situations. In his study of poker players, Hayano argued that players need to be willing to spend more money after a big loss. By ensuring that they have a sufficiently large bankroll and remaining patient, players can often wait out runs of bad luck and take advantage of opportunities when they become available. He writes:

⁹¹‘Cashstop’ is the brand name of the instant teller machines in the regional centre.

Sometimes more gambling is a realistic appraisal of one's situation. Daily losses of thousands of dollars can sometimes be made up only by continued gambling, not by any other legitimate means....gambling is the cause of ruination, but the most likely salvation as well (1982: 105).

Hayano does, however, make the point that players cannot wait forever. If they are to be successful in the long run, they must set limits on the amount that they are willing to lose and the amount of time that they are willing to spend playing. If they don't they are apt to lose a great deal of money.

These observations may be applicable to VLT gamblers as well. Though players are quite limited in the degree of influence that they can exert on the outcome of the game, VLTs do appear to operate in semi-regular pay cycles. Players proceed with the knowledge that their machine will pay out sooner or later, if they wait long enough. In allowing that they have a sufficiently large budget, they can, theoretically, increase their chances of benefiting when it eventually does give a big win. This strategy would be particularly useful if each machine operated independently of all others, as many players believed they did. Since they do not, however, there is no reason to believe that players are any more likely to get a big win on their first spin than they are on their thousandth spin.

In situations where a big win was not forthcoming, players sometimes got frustrated and lost touch with their initial strategy. Often, this led to more reckless betting, and much bigger losses. This phenomenon was explored extensively in Henry Lesieur's 1984 book, The Chase: Career of the Compulsive Gambler. Lesieur borrowed the term 'chasing'⁹² to describe the process that begins "...when a gambler bets either to pay everyday bills or to 'get even' from a fall" (1984:

⁹²The term 'chasing' has folk roots which predate the publication of Lesieur's book.

1). The chasing gambler plays recklessly in an effort to win enough money to cover debts or previous gambling losses.

Lesieur draws a distinction between short and long-term chasing, the latter being what he sees as the primary criterion defining “compulsive gamblers.” Both types of chasing rest on a break-even mentality. The difference is that short-term chasers limit their chasing to a single gambling session and forget about their losses at the end of the day. Long-term chasers, by contrast, do not forget losses. Rather, they carry the memory of past defeats into each new session. For long-term chasers, the only possible resolution of their struggle is winning enough to negate the sum of their previous losses.

Many of the gamblers that I interviewed were engaged in long-term chases. In some cases, players had resolved to not punch out small wins at all, because they felt that they needed big payouts in order to recapture all of the money they had lost. One player was known for his refusal to punch out anything less than five hundred dollars. Another long-term chaser explained:

It's so hard to stay away from it. It's got something on you, because it's got all your money, and you are always trying to get it back. You're saying 'this is my day,' but it never happens. Some days you get two or three hundred, but how much have you spent to get that? If you add it up, you've got three or four thousand gone. So what's a couple of hundred? Nothing. If I don't win five or six hundred, it's no good to me.

Some of the players that had accumulated a string of heavy losses had resolved that they were never going to break even, and instead had set their minds on getting the biggest win possible as a way of getting their redemption.⁹³

All of the interviewees admitted to engaging in some degree of short-term chasing at one

⁹³The most widely coveted wins were: the swinging bells on a fifty bet, and a screen with all sevens.

point or another. Most of the heavy players tried to play until they had won a large enough payout to at least break even for the day, or until they had lost all of the money they had with them. One player described his frustration after chasing a large jackpot:

When you are losing, you get to a certain point where you feel like you have to win it back. So you spend more and more and more. You keep thinking five more, five more and maybe I'll get the bells and make it all back. Before you know it you've got eighty or a hundred dollars into the game.

Some said that it was in these situations that they often became irritated and lost touch with any predefined strategy.

Now that everybody is losing so badly, we feel like we have to keep upping our bets just to have a chance to get it all back. You gets right frustrated because you're losing, and you don't care what happens.

Some players had resolved to not settle for anything less than they came with. If they were not able to rebuild their credits to the level that they started with, they would sooner leave with nothing at all. One of the bartenders observed:

The majority of the people don't care about supper or anything. They don't care if there's a New York cut steak and the Queen of England waiting for them at home. They just want to play until they've got all their money gone or until they win enough to make up for all the money they've spent. If they do lose everything, they'll probably be back the next day and play even more than they did before. That usually makes them feel better because instead of being home thinking about all the money they lost, they are there with a chance to win it back.

This last point must be underscored. For many players, the feeling of coming out a winner was just as important as the money. If they went home with nothing, they were left to dwell upon their loss, whereas if they went back to chase their losses, they were able to put off these feelings until a later time.

In some situations, players had come to regard the machine as holding money which they

felt was rightfully theirs. Thus, they were not willing to allow anyone else to have a chance to win it. Several players said that they would sooner spend all of their money than risk seeing someone else winning on their machine.

The worst is when you've lost a fair amount of money and you've got yourself convinced that the machine is soon going to pay out, and you've got to leave. Whether it's because you have something that you've got to do or because you've run out of money. You convince yourself that the next person is going to win the big pot instead. Your figure that most of it is your money. I've actually spent every cent I had in my pocket so no one else would get that game.

Occasionally, some players would drive home to get more money so that they could continue to play a certain machine.

Lesieur claims that the statistical unlikelihood of ever breaking even in most gambling games, combined with the poor strategies and high bets which impatient chasers often employ, leaves them with little chance of ever recovering their expenditure. Consequently, most long-term chasers plunge into a downward spiral, which eventually leads to severe economic and familial problems (Ibid.). Several scholars have criticized this aspect of Lesieur's theory for regarding chasing as a degenerative condition which inevitably leads to financial and personal disaster. In so doing, he fails to explain why some gamblers are able to recover from chasing periods and resume controlled gambling, while others are not. This, some have argued, produces an artificial dichotomy between 'normal' and 'compulsive' gamblers (Rosencrance 1985; Browne 1989).

As an alternative to chasing, Browne (1989) argued that most gamblers, at one point or another, go "on tilt." By this he means a state in which the gambler is upset by something (usually a big loss), and begins to play recklessly. As with Lesieur's chasers, gamblers that are on tilt become flustered and begin to lose touch with their betting style and strategy. Browne separates

himself from Lesieur, however, by arguing that certain gamblers are successful in minimizing the consequences of these tilt periods by doing “emotion work” or taking time away from the game until they are able to regain their composure. He contends that economic and personal problems are not inevitable results of this style of play, but are dependent on the frequency and the severity of the tilts that individuals experience, and the degree of success that they have in regaining control.

8.1.2.2 THE TEMPTATION TO PUSH ONE’S LUCK

In other cases, a gambler would win a considerable amount and, after spending a token sum on her fellows, decide to stop playing. Sometimes, the player was not yet ready to leave the bar, however. In these situations, it was common for her to be tempted to take another chance later in the evening. One bartender commented:

Some will take out money and say that's it for the day, but then they sit down at the bar for a while and before you know it, they're at it again.

Some players spoke of the difficulty that they had in walking away from the machines while they were winning. A few said that they were so excited to finally be winning, that they were tempted to keep playing and push their luck further. In these situations, it was quite common for players to spend the money that they had won.

The machines are deceiving. It feels like you're winning and then all of a sudden, your money is all gone. Sometimes when you get home, you realize that even though you won two hundred dollars on the bells, you spent it all back in again. Sure you had a few beers and you were happy gambling in the moment, but when you lie down in bed and realize that you had two hundred bucks and you blew it, it feels miserable. You thought you had a good night until you start thinking about all the things you could have spent the money on.

Several players said that even though they knew they should walk away after a win, the temptation

to go for more was often too great to resist.

In some cases, a series of small wins led to a desire to “bet high” and “go for a big hit.” When betting high, the player’s bank of credits usually disappeared very quickly. Several players commented that once they have had their credits up to a certain level, they are not content to settle for anything less. Efforts to rebuild their credits to their previous high sometimes led them to spend what credits they had left. In some cases, it led them to spend even more.

8.1.2.3 THE ROLE OF ALCOHOL

Though many of the regular players elected to refrain from drinking while playing, or did not like to drink at all, there were a number of men who associated heavy drinking with playing the machines. All of these players stated that alcohol had, at one point or another, led them to get “carried away,” and spend too much. Overspending was linked to alcohol in two distinct ways. Several players indicated that they had a tendency to get more competitive with the machines when they were drinking. Their overpowering desire to beat the machine led them to lose track of how much they were spending.

Alcohol is a factor because you feel freer with your money when you drink. The more you lose, the more you drink, and the more you drink, the more you spend. When you drink, you are more apt to try to play mind games with the machine. That leads you to spend a lot more. I know there have been periods where I have been intoxicated and a hundred bucks has just disappeared from my pocket in no time.

Alcohol also seemed to be tied to overspending for some players because it made them more willing to spend their winnings. In addition to playing recklessly, many would buy drinks for themselves and their friends, and some would lend out money much more freely and indiscriminately than they would otherwise. One player described a situation in which he won a great deal of money but his heavy drinking led him to spend it all, and then some.

It seems like people have a tendency to not be as careful with their money when they're drinking. Like, one evening, I stopped in at a store and picked up a couple of Nevada tickets. I won a hundred dollars right off the bat. Then I stopped into another place and won another fifty dollars. So I was on a roll. Also I had gotten my check that day in the mail, and I had that changed up. It seemed like everything was going good. So I had to pop in and try the bell game. So I drove up to the next community and picked up my friend. We went and played for while, and then I dropped her home. Then I decided I'd drop in to the club for a little while longer. Now I had no intentions of playing more of the games, because I 'd had my fill. I had won the hundred and fifty earlier, and I hit the bells twice at the club, which worked out to be another two hundred and fifty. I was drinking heavily, and I wasn't paying close attention to my finances and, by the time I went home, I had all that four hundred gone and another seventy spent out of my check money. Now I went on a major tear, and bought a nice few rounds⁹⁴. I had also helped my friend along, but that's a lot of money. That's when my buddy, the bartender, said, 'Listen, leave your car here, and I'll give you a ride home.' If it weren't closing time, I might have spent even more. But in the end, it was an excellent day, and it only cost me seventy bucks. I was there from 3 PM to 3 AM. It's not so nice when I think about all the money I could have had for other things, though.

8.1.2.4 SOCIAL INVOLVEMENT

The tendency for many Gamblers to overspend seemed to have as much to do with their involvement in the social scene of the bar as with their attraction to the machines themselves. Some said that they did not always come to the bar with the intention of playing. Rather, they sometimes came to relieve their boredom and socialize with their friends, but were eventually talked into playing.

Sometimes I'll go over with no intentions of playing at all. I just go over for a couple of beers. Then, before I know it, one of the byes will get you to double up and all of a sudden, you're at it again.

Another factor leading to overspending was the tendency of players to treat each other to rounds after hitting the swinging bells. As discussed in chapter two, this etiquette was even in place in situations where the value of the win did not exceed the amount that the player had spent

⁹⁴In this context, to go "on a major tear" means to get very drunk.

in order to get it. This paradox was explained by one of the heaviest Gamblers.

When hit the bells you end up spending all the money. You know, everything is flowing and your buying drinks, and everything. By the time you get the bells, you are probably after spending forty or fifty dollars, and then you end up buying drinks for everybody. You're usually left with nothing. Sometimes even less than nothing.

The widespread taboo against punching out slips that were not multiples of one hundred credits (\$5.00) sometimes led people to play their winnings down as well. It was fairly common for players to get distracted by the game, or by a conversation with another player, and accidentally let their credits slip below the twenty dollar level. This socially obliges them to either build their credits back up to the twenty dollar benchmark, or play them down to fifteen. Many regular players would not deem this latter amount worthy of keeping, and would instead decide to continue gambling in the hope that something better would come along. This may result in the loss of the remainder of their credits.

8.1.3 OTHER MOTIVATIONS FOR OVERSPENDING

On some occasions, players would spend more than they had allotted not because they lost track of their spending, but because they had some other incentive to continue gambling. In these situations, the financial cost may pale by comparison to the rewards to be gained by further gambling. The two most common motivations in this category will be referred to as: 'must-win gambling' and 'escape gambling.'

8.1.3.1 MUST-WIN GAMBLING

As discussed in chapter Five, some players said that their sole reason for playing was to experience the euphoric state that they derived from hitting the swinging bells. In the most extreme cases, players would continue to play until they got the bells, regardless of how much it

cost them. This often meant spending considerably more than the value of the payout that resulted from hitting the bells. The monetary value of the prize seemed to pale by comparison to the joyous experience of winning it. For these players, it was a routine occurrence to spend more than they had hoped to. These losses, however, were generally accepted as a necessary price for the thrill of coming out a winner.

People know money. If you win money, you're somebody. Nobody really thinks about how much you spend, it's how much you win. A lot of us will spend twice as much just to have that sense of being a winner. When I win, I'll probably blow all the money but I felt good so it doesn't matter. The same hundred dollars that I started with is gone, and then some, say a hundred or two hundred that I won besides it is gone, but I feel elated. I won. I won at something. The problem is that I have to have at least one win in order to feel good at all.

In these situations, control does not seem to be impaired at all. Rather, it is the strategy employed by the gambler that leads to his overspending. Some players were more concerned with experiencing the wave of excitement that tended to accompany "the bells."

I had to get the bells. Lots of times. I would stay until I got 'em. You weren't happy until you got 'em. That meant more than the actual winning of the money. It was the challenge. It didn't matter how much money it took. The only way to get the rush was to get the bells.

The money don't mean nothing after a while. Once you gets into it, it's just about getting that high. It really excites you to get the bells. After a while, the money isn't important. I think it's the high more than the money. I've known people to spend six or seven hundred dollars into it just to get that high.

8.1.3.2 ESCAPE GAMBLING

Another situation in which some players seemed to make a conscious decision to spend money freely was escape gambling. As mentioned in chapter five, several players reported that they frequently gambled to get away from a problem in their lives. In many cases, these problems involved a spouse or some other family member that shared a residence with the player. For some,

the bar served as a place to go in order to get away from these persons. In these situations, the gambler may not want to go home for an extended period of time. Her expenditure into the VLT was equivalent to paying a form of rent at the bar until her problem blew over or until she was able to face it again.⁹⁵ Some players also reported that they tended to spend more money and adopt more of a fatalistic and aggressive style when they were upset about something. This also led them to spend more.

When you are dealing with personal troubles, you spend more. If you're fed up with everything else, you start putting in more money. That's when you put most of your money in.

Though none of these players wanted to spend any more than they felt they had to, what mattered most was that they could continue playing for as long as possible.

⁹⁵This point was also made by Fisher (1993), who argued that machine players often play as a form of escapism, and that gambling provides a way of buying time at an establishment.

Chapter Nine

DIVIDED LOYALTIES: ECONOMIC AND PERSONAL PROBLEMS RESULTING FROM OVERSPENDING

This chapter explores some of the connections between consistent overspending and economic and personal problems in the lives of regular gamblers. While most players described the actual experience of playing the machines in a positive light, the majority felt that their tendencies to overspend created difficulties in other aspects of their lives. The unhappiness resulting from these difficulties led many to say that VLTs had been a negative force in their lives overall.

While most regular players said that they had experienced some problems as a result of their overspending, it was clear that these problems were not experienced to the same degree by all people. Variables such as the overall financial situation of the player, and the degree of support offered by family and friends, played important roles in determining the extent to which individual players had to contend with gambling-related problems. Nonetheless, consistent losses on VLTs did tend to bring about a specific set of challenges, both economic and otherwise, that most heavy players had to struggle with at one point or another.

The first section of the chapter explores the role of media and popular culture in influencing local perceptions of the potential hazards posed by excessive play. Though many players had heard about cases of extreme poverty and personal ruin resulting from VLT playing, these stories appear to be only partially reflective of local realities. The second section explores the three most common types of problems that local players actually did experience. These are: financial problems, problems with mood control and irritability, and interpersonal and familial problems.

9.1 THE MASS MEDIA AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GAMBLING PROBLEMS ON THE BARREN SHORE

“VLTs the Crack Cocaine of Gambling”

“Easy to Get Hooked On This Money Sucker”

“Children Being Ignored While Parents Gamble on VLTs”

“Family Blames Suicide on Video Lottery Addiction”

“The Scourge of VLTs”

Headlines like these about the negative economic and personal consequences that VLTs can inflict upon their users have dominated much of the journalistic attention that the machines have received in Canada. For the most part, newspaper articles have focussed on extreme cases in urban settings, and have offered little insight into the proportion of regular gamblers that routinely experience problems as a result of their gambling. Also, few authors have explored the ways in which VLT-related problems are manifested differently in rural as opposed to urban settings, or in differing cultural contexts.

People living on the Barren Shore did not appear to have escaped the influence of these media reports. Most people, both gamblers and non-gamblers alike, spoke of VLTs in very negative terms, readily citing instances of players whose uncontrollable gambling habits had caused them to “*lose everything*” and “*ruin their lives*.” Several people cited cases in which the gambling debts accumulated by heavy players forced them to: sell their homes or their cars, break up their families, or in the worst cases, take their own lives.

It soon became apparent that many of the stories that players spoke about had been seen on television, read about in the newspaper, or heard about “*through the grapevine*.” When I asked

exclusively about the problems that the players had actually witnessed or experienced themselves, the nature of the stories changed considerably. None of the players I interviewed knew people who had sold homes or land to finance gambling, though several made reference to one local player and his family, who had been forced to move in with his parents after having rented their own house for several years. Also, none of the players reported knowing anyone who had sold their cars or trucks for the sole purpose of obtaining gambling funds, or paying gambling debts. Two players did confess to having fallen behind in their car payments, but none of their vehicles had been repossessed.

While it is difficult to know whether the loss of homes or automobiles would be more common in other social contexts, there is reason to suggest that the rarity of these events in the study area is related to the nature of the economy in the region. Most people owned and, in most cases, had a hand in building their own homes. Thus, very few had to worry about paying rent. Since there were no property taxes in the district, the cost of maintaining a home was minimal. Also, the extremely poor real estate market did not leave the selling of homes or land as a realistic option. The high emigration rate that followed the cod moratorium meant that there was no shortage of homes for sale. Those area residents that did succeed in selling were considered fortunate to recoup the money that they had spent on the home.

The infrequency of automobile sales may also be related to the uniqueness of outport economies. Many people, particularly men, had become well versed in auto-mechanics, and were able to perform basic maintenance work on their vehicles. Those that lacked this expertise, tended to know someone who could do the work in exchange for some other favour, or for a minimal charge. Thus, for most people, automobiles could be maintained for the cost of gas, occasional

replacement parts, and insurance. Furthermore, most of those players that owned automobiles did so because they were indispensable for work purposes or for other reasons, and few had considered selling.

Perhaps because sensational stories of catastrophe, like those documented in the media, were so infrequent in the area, those cases that did fit the stereotype had been widely gossiped about, and were well known to many in the VLT playing community. The most common case involved a woman who lived in the regional centre, forty-five minutes from the study area. When her husband was successful in securing a temporary job in Alberta, he asked her to cancel his employment insurance payments. Instead of fulfilling his request, the woman allowed the payments to continue, and used the money to finance her gambling. The man was later arrested for continuing to draw EI while working, and the end of the marriage soon followed. In another case, a woman had gambled with her rent money while her husband had been away for several weeks on a fishing boat. When he returned home, he found that his keys no longer fit the locks on his home. Soon after, the man learned that the couple had been evicted, and that his wife had been forced to move in with her sister. VLTs were also thought to have factored in two recent suicides, one on the Barren Shore and another in a nearby region. In addition, they were cited as friction points in many divorces and separations.

For the most part, however, these stories were not consistent with the kinds of sacrifices endured by the majority of the heavy gamblers in the region. The lived reality of these players more typically consisted of smaller scale deprivations which were more easily shielded from public view. Some of the regulars speculated that enormous losses were probably more common in urban areas like St. John's, and were less typical of outport communities, where people had grown used

to living on meagre incomes, and were more cautious about spending large sums of money. The next section reviews some of the financial difficulties that were common to heavy gamblers on the Barren Shore.

9.2 FINANCIAL PROBLEMS RELATED TO OVERSPENDING

9.2.1 HEAVY LOSSES AND THE POVERTY CYCLE

It appears that while many of the Gamblers found themselves in situations of chronic scarcity as a result of their gambling, only a few were in states of utter financial ruin. For the majority of the regulars, the economic consequences of heavy gambling were experienced as an ongoing struggle rather than a sudden cataclysmic disaster. The financial strain brought by VLT losses had the effect of imbuing routine day-to-day expenditures with added tension, but did not typically result in complete bankruptcy.

In addition to their own financial needs, the majority of the twenty-five interviewees (60%) had dependent children, and many were married, or living in common law relationships (48%). Thus, each paycheck had to be divided between a wide array of competing interests. Though most were receiving an employment income of some kind, few had much of their payment left over by the time their next check arrived. Most of the regulars had come to think of their economic cycle in terms of regular payment intervals (which were usually bi-weekly). What mattered most was that they had enough money left over to carry them through to their next check, without forcing them to make major adjustments to the lifestyles which they and their families had become accustomed to.

Heavy gambling had the potential to upset the economic cycle by reducing the funds available for other expenses. Periods of extreme scarcity were often the result of just one day of

dramatic overspending. This was especially true when the overspending session came a significant amount of time before the player's next payday. The fact that very few of the Gamblers had saved up any money added to this problem, because most did not have anything to fall back on in times of need. For most players, the most effective way to cover for a big loss was short-term personal or familial deprivation. A frequently employed strategy was to simply pinch pennies, in whatever ways they could, until they were able to obtain more money. Some of the adjustments made by Gamblers on the Shore included: selling possessions, cutting back on personal expenditures, cutting back on familial expenditures, and putting off regular payments, bills, groceries, or other essential items.

a) Selling Possessions

Only two players spoke of selling possessions to obtain money to gamble or to cover gambling losses. In one case, a man had pawned an antique coin to obtain money to play. In the other, a man had sold his television to get enough money to cover his rent after he had spent his entire paycheck on the machines. A major factor limiting property sales may be that the nearest pawn shop was almost an hour's drive away from the clubs on the Shore. The only other route for the player to pursue would be to place an advertisement in the local newspaper. Either way, a player would have to go considerably out of her way if she wanted to sell something. It would be expected that the practice of selling possessions to obtain money to play would be more common in communities where an established infrastructure was in place, allowing players to find an available buyer with relatively short notice.

b) Cutting Back on Personal Consumption

Some players sought to save money by cutting back on personal consumption. This may include drinking less, smoking fewer cigarettes, or driving their car less often. In some cases, these sacrifices were extremely difficult for players to make. One heavy smoker spoke of her reaction after a day of overspending.

When you come out and you got twenty or thirty dollars gone, you are disgusted with yourself. You think, 'Oh God, I could have used that money to put gas in the car or bought a pack of smokes. Now I have to do without'

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which players are sacrificing these personal items because many people said that they tried to keep a set budget for all personal expenditures. On those weeks where a player spent too much money gambling, he might be less likely to buy alcohol, because he did not have enough “*mad money*.”⁹⁶ Similarly, on weeks where a player spent an inordinate amount on alcohol, he might try to gamble less in order to compensate for the lost funds.

c) Cutting Back on Familial Consumption

In other cases, players tried to save by taking money that had been set aside for familial expenses. One woman said that prior to taking up gambling, she would renovate her home in some way each year. Now she usually required that money to pay for essential items. Another said that she used to keep a separate account for buying Christmas gifts each year. In recent years, however, she had abandoned this custom, because she had so little extra money.

⁹⁶ “*Mad money*” is the term used on the Shore to describe ‘extra’ money that can be freely disposed of for the purposes of recreation.

d) Putting Off Payments, Bills or Groceries

Another common method of compensating for a big loss was to put off one or more payments. These payments might include such things as electricity bills, heating oil bills, phone bills, rent payments, mortgage payments, car payments, student loan payments, bank loan payments, furniture payments, or other regular payment items. A few of the players admitted to having their phone or electricity cut off because they had let their bills build up for too long. One heavy player said that he had lost his phone three times and his electricity once because he had not been able to pay his bills. He attributed these incidents to the high cost of his regular drinking and VLT gambling, as well as his penchant for buying breakopen tickets. Also, several players said that they had taken money that they had put aside for payments and played with it, in the hopes of turning it into more.

I feel bad about it because I've spent hundreds of dollars on days when I know that my light bill isn't paid. And it is a cryin' shame. It's ridiculous. It's hard to stomach. I have a lot friends who have played with their light bill money, knowing it would be two or three weeks before they would get any more cash. I know people who do that regularly.

There were also several instances of cases where players were forced to return items that they had already made payments on, because they didn't have enough money to complete the transaction. In some cases, the player cancelled the purchase when he realized that he could better use the remaining funds for other purposes. In other situations, the items were repossessed when it became clear that the person was unable to pay.

Another adjustment that some players made was to buy less expensive groceries, or to subsist on whatever food had already been bought until the next check arrived.

Usually I try to make sure I've got all the bills paid and the groceries bought before I'll play, but I have cut back on the groceries, and on the bills for that matter. Now, that's not just the slot machines, that's to have enough money to go out.

In a few cases, this brought about severe problems, as families were left without nutritious food for extended periods. More often, however, these periods were navigated through with the help of bailouts from family or friends.

9.2.2 BAILOUTS

The primary way in which players coped with extreme financial crises was by turning to friends or family for financial assistance, or food. The free lending of food between extended family members and friends is one instance in which outports may differ from more urban environments. In a city, players may be forced to patronize food banks to get them through difficult times. People living in rural areas are forced to rely on a different type of safety net. In rural Newfoundland communities, many people keep fish or game in their freezers throughout the year. In periods of desperation, people living in outports can make use of these supplies, or can borrow food from others. Being forced to turn to others for food or money brought about feelings of shame for some players, and most would only ask for help as a last resort.

On some occasions, I'll think about it afterwards. Like when I wasted a hundred dollars into it. I wake up the next morning and say, 'How stupid are you?' I think, 'Oh I shouldn't have gone there. I could have done better things with that money.' I find myself four or five days down the road trying to get a lend of fifty dollars to do me until check day, when really there shouldn't have been any need of it at all.

Smaller scale financial assistance (sometimes as high as a thousand dollars, but usually less than a hundred) could sometimes be obtained from other gamblers, but in situations where greater assistance was needed, it was usually provided by extended family or very close friends. Although gambling friends frequently loaned each other money for gambling, drinking, cigarettes, and fast

food, it was rare that they had a great deal of money left over to help people with bills, groceries, and other large expenses. One player shed light on the nature of lending between the Gamblers: *"Other players are quick to lend money, but that's for fun, not usually for necessities."*

The greatest problems were experienced by those persons whose consistently reckless gambling had earned them reputations for not paying back loans. In some cases, players had run up hundreds of dollars of debts to bartenders and other players, and had been branded as *"hopeless cases."* These persons sometimes found it difficult to obtain help from others, regardless of how difficult their circumstances were. If these players desperately needed money, their only hope was to turn to banks or other credit granting institutions.

9.2.3 CREDIT AND THE 'NEW POVERTY'

Banks, and other financial institutions are very new to the Barren Shore. It was not until the early 1980s that the first such enterprises moved in. Even to this day, most people have to travel at least a half an hour to get to the nearest bank, although debit card withdrawals are now available in most variety stores. The 1980s also marked the introduction of a variety of other credit granting institutions, including credit card companies, furniture wholesalers, and even government grant programs and student loans. Because the notion of credit (in the contemporary sense), is so recent, many people continued to place strong values on reciprocity and local level exchange and were reluctant to become involved with large financial institutions.⁹⁷ One local person remarked:

⁹⁷It could be argued that the system of merchant capitalism that governed the region for much of its history was, in itself, a form of credit, because it allowed fishers to be given advances for fishing supplies and food which were to be repaid in fish at the end of the season (Cadigan 1995).

In the old days, everyone owned everything they had. Nobody ever believed in these grants and loans and stuff. That's the way it should be, I think.

Another way in which banks have helped to make credit a part of the VLT scene is through the purveying of personal cheques. Most all of the bartenders interviewed said that they used to be much more willing to accept personal checks, but the frequency with which the checks would bounce had led them to be leery of taking them indiscriminately. Some now forbade the cashing of cheques for VLT purposes, though most continued to allow this practice among those that they knew well.

The introduction of banks and credit cards to the Shore has, in effect, created a new form of poverty. The troubled history of the region has made many rural Newfoundlanders familiar with the 'old poverty' of scrounging to get by, but banks have established a 'new poverty' of debt. The old poverty was community based, and was handled by day to day penny pinching, and a reliance on the kindness of others. The new poverty is linked to exogenous financial institutions, and is not as sensitive to the life situation of the debtor. As a consequence, it is much less forgiving. It was the few Gamblers that had become embroiled in dealings with banks that suffered the greatest financial difficulties as a consequence of their VLT playing. Both of the VLT players who had committed suicide in the area were rumoured to have had severe credit problems at the time of their deaths.

A few of the Gamblers had also taken out personal lines of credit as a means of repaying debts they had to others, and paying off bill payments. All of these players continued to be in dire straits economically at the time of writing. None had yet been forced to make major changes to their lifestyles, however. One of these players speculated that the negative consequences brought

by overspending on VLTs must be even worse for employed people living in larger centres, who have the capacity to secure large scale bank loans and liquidate assets easily. This, in turn, made them much more capable of gambling themselves into states of complete disaster.

9.3 INDIRECT CONSEQUENCES OF OVERSPENDING

In addition to the financial problems caused by overspending on VLTs, significant losses also produced a variety of indirect problems for many of the Gamblers. In the next two sections, I will examine two of the most common varieties of indirect problems. The first are the feelings of negativity, physical sickness, or mood swings that often accompany heavy losses. The second are familial and interpersonal problems stemming from overspending.

9.3.1 UNHAPPINESS AND MOOD CHANGES

One of the most widely experienced VLT-related problems was the feeling of moodiness or depression that some players experienced after losing money. The majority of the Gamblers said that occasions when they gambled more than they planned brought on feelings of unhappiness. While immersed in play, it was rare for them to think about how far behind they were. A number of players said that the consequences of their losses did not become fully apparent to them until after they had extricated themselves from the gambling scene.

You know, its funny, even though you know you're losing, your feelings don't change until you realize what you've spent. Then you can't sleep. You feel guilty.

In these situations, players were left to contemplate the potential uses of the money that they had lost.

When you're winning, you are sure you are going to get the bells, but as soon as you start losing money you say, 'My god, what a waste of money.' It's especially bad once you've had a chance to think about it.

For the most part, occasions of overspending were met with feelings of remorse on the part of the players. It was very common for players to report having difficulty falling asleep after a big loss. Some players spoke of suffering extreme depression after a day of heavy spending.

When you lose, it's your worst fucking nightmare. It's somebody telling you that your child has been killed. It is that extreme. The pain and the sense of loss is horrible. If I go in there and blow a hundred dollars, and I know that it is the last hundred dollars that I am going to have for the week, I feel despair. I'm depressed. I have to go home and sleep. I try to sleep through it.

Another said that she felt shame, self-loathing, and regret when she suffered a big loss:

You go in feeling happy as a lark and if you lose, you walk out feeling awful. If you lose a hundred dollars, you could cry. I've seen such sadness in people when they've spent all their money. It's unbelievable. You're wondering how you're going to get money for the things you need. You just don't realize what you're doing until it's too late. The feeling of self-loathing is just unbearable.

A few players said that their feelings of grief sometimes took on physical manifestations. Three people said that extreme losses sometimes made them sick to their stomachs.

When you lose, you get this awful feeling in the pit of your stomach. I used to get sick to my stomach. I would get to the point where I would have to go outside and get fresh air or go into the bathroom and vomit if I lost.

Two of these players, and one additional player, said that they couldn't eat for a few hours after they had lost a lot of money. These cases seem to fit with Lorenz and Yaffee's finding that forty-two percent of their sample of Gambler's Anonymous participants said that they experienced a knotted stomach, loose bowels, or constipation, which they related to their gambling losses (1987: 282).

It was also common for players to feel anger after a suffering a big loss.

When you lose you get pissed off and frustrated. You get disgusted with yourself for having stayed there so long and for having lost more than you wanted to. A lot of people are like that. If they are losing money, you don't talk to them or they'll eat you....A few of us in particular.

For most players, anger seems to be related to the frustration of having spent too much. Unlike those that experienced guilt and remorse, however, these players were more apt to project their frustrations outward. Two players said that they found that they had much shorter tempers after they had spent more than they had planned to..

9.3.2 FAMILIAL AND INTERPERSONAL TENSIONS

a) The Impact of Financial Problems on Family Relationships

The most widely experienced familial problems concerned the distribution of household finances. When one partner in a relationship took to spending much more money than the other, problems often ensued. This was usually due to the fact that a greater proportion of the household economic burdens fell upon the other spouse, or were not dealt with at all. This forced some families sacrifice other things. Some of the most severe problems occurred in situations where couples had taken to keeping joint bank accounts, and the gambler had easy access to the money of his partner. One player, who was undergoing relationship trouble of his own explained:

Those machines are destroying families. If you've got a thirty thousand dollar a year job and your wife asks you where you are going every night and she looks at the bank account and sees that all the money is gone, what are you going to do?

In cases where the gambler's partner or children felt that the family was having to make sacrifices to accommodate her gambling, feelings of resentment sometimes developed. As mentioned, many of the regular players were parents. Most of their children were in their teenage years. Many children in this age group requested considerable sums of money from their parents.

In addition to requiring money for food and other basic expenses, it was also common for these kids to ask for money to pay for clothing and recreation.

Teenagers in the region exhibited tremendous brand loyalty. All of the kids that I spoke to agreed that it was socially unacceptable to wear clothing that did not bare the insignia of a major athletics company. Most owned a nylon jacket, at least one pair of running shoes, and multiple t-shirts, sweat shirts, and pairs of pants which all prominently featured brand names such as: Nike; Adidas, Reebok, Puma, Tommy Hilfinger, and Fila. The cost of these items ranged from about twenty dollars for T-shirts up to two-hundred for jackets. To add to this expense, most teenage kids told me that it was socially unacceptable to wear the same article of clothing to school twice in the same week. When I asked one teenager that I knew quite well about why these rules were in place, she replied:

Kid: *"Well, like, you don't wear the same thing two days in a row, cause that means you're a skank."*

Me: "A skank?"

Kid: *"Yeah, it means you're dirty, and smelly, and you don't care about how you look. And it shows you're poor, too. A lot of kids get picked on for that."*

Me: "What about the brand names. Why does everyone wear brand names?"

Kid: *"Well, you know, they're just good quality clothes. They're made well, and they have lots of cool colours and stuff."*

Steadfast dedication to these fashion beliefs served to uphold the social hierarchy among teenagers on the Shore. Those who did not sport expensive clothing items tended to be negatively sanctioned by their peers, and some were subject to mockery or social exclusion.

A similar hierarchy was at work surrounding recreation. Teenagers frequently congregated

on weekends for dances at one of the local community halls, or to play video games at the region's only arcade. Some of those kids who could not afford to spend money at these events complained that they had a hard time fitting in with those that did.

Teenagers who could not afford to wear the desirable clothes, or go to the desirable social events, often faced added stress in their school lives. In situations where the children recognized that their parent was regularly spending large sums of money on gambling, it was not uncommon for them to channel some of this stress into arguments with the parent. In one case, a heavy player was challenged by his daughter when he refused to take a manual labour job that he was offered after he had been cut off of the TAGS program. Instead he elected to stay on social assistance in the hopes that he would be able to secure a berth on a crab fishing boat for the next season. She accused him of spending all of his time and money gambling and drinking while his family barely had money to buy groceries, much less to go out with their friends, or buy new clothes. The man, who was also aware of this problem, explained:

I'm a single parent and I've got responsibilities. When I spend more than I have budgeted, I feel bad. There are more important things that could be invested into. I know how it feels to walk away with nothing. It's not a good feeling my friend. I've got two kids living with me, right? They're teenagers, so they want everything that's on the go. So I can't justify going up and spending a hundred bucks when one of them needs a pair of sneakers or something. Where do you draw the lines? This is a good bit of entertainment for you, but they may need it for entertainment for them. It's a job to judge when it becomes a problem.

Another man, who was also a former TAGS recipient, came under fire from his wife and children for drawing money from his children's university savings accounts, and his aged mother's pension so that he could continue to gamble at the level to which he had grown accustomed.

It was also common for problems to erupt in situations where both partners in a romantic

relationship had taken to gambling heavily. One man bemoaned the fact that he couldn't criticize his wife for her excessive gambling, because he was, himself, a heavy gambler. The couple had grown accustomed to gambling together, as a recreational activity, but this activity had become problematic for them when they both began to gamble beyond levels that they felt they could afford. Both said that they wanted to cut down, but each admitted to encouraging the other to play on some occasions. As a result, both said that they felt that they tended to play far more than they would if left to their own devices.

The wife is in deep. I can't say for sure, but I think she's in even deeper than I am. She wants to cut down. The problem is that I encourage her. That's wrong of me. I worries about her. I don't know why I do it.

One partner told me that when the couple began to experience financial problems, arguments started to erupt about which one had the “*real gambling problem*.”

It was also common for regulars to report having lost or damaged friendships because they had let their gambling get out of control. The most common scenario was when the gambler had borrowed a large sum of money from the friend to pay bills or previous gambling debts, with the promise that it would soon be repaid. In situations where the gambler continued to play heavily rather than repaying the debt, some friends felt betrayed and discontinued the relationship.

b) Neglect

A second set of problems were related to familial neglect. Many of the heaviest gamblers had gotten used to spending long hours at the bar. Several people had come to use it as a social venue, even when they were not gambling. As a result, many of these persons faced criticism for not spending enough time at home. This had a variety of negative consequences in the romantic relationships of several of the Gamblers.

Firstly, it sometimes had negative effects on the level of communication and intimacy between the two partners. This effect may be of a dual nature, because in addition to being physically absent for long periods, some spouses complained that even when the gambler was home, she was frequently distracted by thoughts of gambling, or of the day's events at the club. This, in turn, made it harder for the pair to find "quality time" together.

Another effect of heavy gambling on romantic relationships is that the majority of household duties often fell upon the other partner. This may include such things as: housework, outdoor work, and the running of errands. This added workload can put a great deal of pressure on the gambler's partner, and can lead to arguments.

A related complaint was that the gambler was neglecting her children. One man, whose wife was a heavy gambler, said:

It has a terrible effect on our kids. Not only is she always taking something away from them, she's never home with them.

Neglect on the part of one parent adversely affected the other member of the couple in multiple ways. In addition to forcing them to take on the bulk of the parenting duties, it sometimes led to a stigmatization of both parents by other members of the community. This accusation was much more commonly directed at women, but men were subject to it as well, particularly single parents. One of the most frequently criticized situations involved a woman who frequently left her seven-year-old child and one-year-old baby in her car outside the club while she was playing VLTs. Sometimes this went on for hours at a time. Another woman was talked about for taking an alternate approach, and leaving her three young children at home alone while she played. One of the heaviest players said that her neglect of her family eventually brought her to the point where

she had to choose between her gambling friends and her family. Eventually, she decided to quit gambling altogether.

The only thing that stopped me is that the kids were saying 'Mom, we need you.' It had nothing to do with the amount of money I lost. That was never important. It came down to what you valued most. If you're failing at home, you feel like you're failing up there (at the club) too. You had to make time. I have noticed that a lot of people will drop out for a little while to try to get things back on track at home, but they know deep down that they will be back.

This comment echoes a point raised by several of the Gamblers, who said that they often felt that their loyalties were divided between their family members and their close gambling friends. Some of the Gamblers seemed to feel as though they had to struggle to hold down a double identity. They didn't want to let down their loved ones in either of their two primary social worlds.

c) Lying and Provoking Mistrust

Another source of conflict for some couples was the tendency for certain regular players to lie about their gambling. It was fairly common for players to admit to lying to their partners about how much they had won or lost. This was much easier for persons who kept their finances separate from those of their partner, or in situations where the partner had a limited knowledge about the spending patterns of the gambler.

Some players had taken to lying about the fact that they had been gambling at all. Most bartenders said that they were frequently asked to cover for players when the phone rang. Many said that they disliked this role because they were often on good terms with the gambler's partner as well. One bartender said that he was reluctant to cover for players because he had once been confronted by a gambler's wife, who had come to the bar to look for her husband. A half an hour previously, she had called and the bartender had told her that he wasn't there. Realizing that he

had lied, she criticized him for helping to break up families, and vowed never to patronize the establishment again. Knowing that the other area bars would gladly cover for most of the Gamblers, however, he grudgingly continued to cover for his best customers. Another bartender said that she had observed an ironic instance in which the two members of a couple were both playing “*on the sly*,” and both had asked her to not tell the other that they had been playing.

Another common way in which players sought to hide their playing was by hiding their cars. Several regulars said that, whenever possible, they would go to establishments which allowed for cars to be parked behind the building or in some other concealed location that could not be seen from the main road. This way, passers by would not report back to their partners that they had been gambling. A few players said that they had even travelled to other parts of the island to play. Some would make day trips into St. John’s, where they knew they could get lost in the anonymity of the urban bar scene. Others would stay closer to home, but would try to go to places where they were unlikely to be recognized.

These deceptive activities brought a number of difficulties to bear upon the relationships between the gamblers and their partners. Some of the gamblers that had been caught in one or more lies, had lost the trust of their partner, and had their future activities scrutinized more carefully. One heavy player explained:

You lose a lot of things when you gamble heavily. You lose trust. You lose the respect of your friends and family. It's the last straw for a lot of people (romantic partners). They just can't take it.

Even in cases where the lying gambler had not been caught, some partners had become suspicious about how he was spending all of his time. Three of the regulars said that they had been accused of having an affair by their partners because of all of the days that they spent away from home.

d) Moodiness and Irritability

The last major category of problems involved the erratic mood swings and irritability experienced by some heavy players. As discussed earlier, heavy losses on VLTs can have powerful mood-changing effects on certain persons. Some said that this made it difficult for them to relate to others after they had left the club. Several players said that they had taken out their gambling frustrations on their partner or their family in the form of verbal or, in one case, physical abuse. Another man said that he routinely picked fights with his wife when he had the desire to play. This way, he could storm out of the house in a pretend rage and go back to the club.

9.3.3 THE CHALLENGE OF ISOLATING THE ROLE PLAYED BY VLTs IN EMOTIONAL AND INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS

While many of the heavy Gamblers attributed one or more interpersonal problems in their lives to their tendency to spend too much on VLTs, it is difficult to say conclusively whether the machines were solely to blame for these problems. It may be that, in some cases, VLTs provided a convenient scapegoat for problems that would have been present anyway.

This may be particularly true of strain in romantic relationships. A few players told me that certain couples had been having serious difficulties long before VLTs arrived, and that heavy gambling on the part of one or both partners had merely exacerbated them. Some heavy players had previously been heavy drug or alcohol users, but had been able to quit since they became involved with VLTs. It may be that these habits had exacted similar, or even greater, financial and emotional costs on the gamblers family relationships. One woman told me that even though she detested the fact that her husband gambled, she was thankful that his expenditures on the machines had led him to cut back on his drinking. This being said, it seems clear that overspending on VLTs

reduced the amount of time and money that people had available to spend on other aspects of their lives. This, in turn, brought a number added of stresses to bear on some of the Gamblers and their families.

Chapter Ten

THE BLAME GAME: EFFORTS TO MAKE SENSE OF CONSISTENT OVERSPENDING

The majority of the Gamblers expressed the belief that it was the responsibility of the individual player to keep his or her gambling under control. In practice, however, not many had been able to do this consistently. A significant majority of the Gamblers expressed a desire to cut down on their VLT playing or to quit altogether, but few had been able to accomplish either of these goals. While some players projected blame for the magnitude of their losses outward, toward the bar staff, or toward "*the government*" and the Atlantic Lottery Corporation, it was much more common for players to lay blame upon themselves.

The difficulty that players experienced in keeping their gambling in check created a fundamental tension in their lives. Many sought to resolve this tension by invoking the concept of addiction. Believing that they were at the mercy of a disease beyond their control, these players were able to banish some of the guilt that arose from their overspending. In accepting addiction as the sole explanation, however, these persons did not recognize the importance of situational variables in stimulating their recurrent overspending. Faith in the addiction paradigm created a problem in itself for many players, because it caused them to abandon any hope of ever regaining control over their gambling or, in some cases, their lives. By contrast, those persons who were more successful in regaining control over their spending, did so by recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of gambling dependence, and pioneering creative new ways of regulating their behaviour.

10.1 ATTEMPTS TO CUT DOWN OR QUIT

For most people, participation in the group of Gamblers brought significant financial burdens.⁹⁸ In many cases, it had come at a considerable personal cost as well. Though a few players were quite positive about the effect that VLTs had on their lives, most spoke disdainfully of the machines, and many seemed to regret their involvement with them. Twenty-one of the twenty-five players (84%) said they had a desire to cut down on their gambling, and fifteen (60%) said that they had a desire to quit completely. Many Gamblers said that they had made one or more efforts to abstain from playing, but had eventually returned to gambling heavily.⁹⁹ Two players commented on these failed attempts:

I've often felt bad when I lose a lot of money and then gotten away from it for the head spell,¹⁰⁰ but sooner or later I get back into it again. I'm after saying a thousand times that it's my last time, but the next day, I'm back to the games. Everyday you're saying that to yourself. But you don't. A lot of people talk about quitting, but everyday you see the same people.

A lot of people want to quit or cut down, myself included, but it never lasts for very long. Two to three weeks max for most people. Everybody has got the desire that they want to give it up, but I guess it's the same as with cigarettes. You either have to have a lot of will power or no money.

10.2 LOCUS OF CONTROL

Many of the players who had tried and failed to corral their gambling expressed feelings of intense shame and unhappiness. This may be due, in part, to the strong value on self-reliance that

⁹⁸Two of the Gamblers had significantly higher incomes than most of the others, and were able to maintain relatively high expenditures without incurring significant changes to their standard of living.

⁹⁹The periods of abstinence described by Gamblers ranged from as short as ten days to as long as thirteen months.

¹⁰⁰In this context, the term "head spell" refers to an exceptionally long period of time.

characterizes many Newfoundland communities (Chairamonte 1999; Nemec 1999b). The majority of the Gamblers said that they believed it was the responsibility of the individual player to regulate the level at which he or she gambled. Those that were not able to keep their gambling within acceptable limits found themselves alienated from this value, and were forced to adopt a lesser image of themselves.

One way players coped with guilt brought on by this rupture between thought and action was by blaming their gambling problems on forces outside of their control. This fits with John Rosencrance's (1988) argument that many problem gamblers come to adopt an external locus of control. In attributing culpability to outside factors, players feel partially exonerated of responsibility for the severity of their gambling losses. I observed two main forms of external blaming at work in the clubs of the Barren Shore: 1) the blaming of persons and organizations involved in the provision of VLT gambling and 2) the blaming of gambling addiction, a sickness which players felt they were powerless to control.

10.2.1 BLAMING PERSONS AND ORGANIZATIONS INVOLVED IN THE PROVISION OF GAMBLING

10.2.1.1 BLAMING OF CLUB OWNERS AND STAFF

The most frequent targets of blame were the owners of local clubs and, to a lesser extent, their employees. It should be noted that, because of the relatively low profits of many of these clubs, the owners or part-owners tended to log much of the bartending time.¹⁰¹ Because these persons were both community members and profiteers, they made excellent scapegoats for those wishing to pin the responsibility for their VLT losses on someone other than themselves.

¹⁰¹Most also employed between one and five other people in part-time capacities.

Generally, criticisms against the owners and staff of the club took one of two forms. Some focussed on the fact that the clubs were making money at the expense of the gamblers in the community. Others assumed that bar staff had inside knowledge about how the machines operated and were using this knowledge to win the money of the other players.

a) Capitalizing on the Misfortunes of Others

As has been previously discussed, Newfoundland club owners receive about twenty-four percent of the profits derived from the playing of VLTs in their clubs (ALC 2000). Representatives of two of the clubs on the Barren Shore both estimated that their club received between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars per year from the machines. This represented about fifty to sixty percent of their overall income. This figure does not, however, factor in the considerable costs associated with paying taxes on their profits, contributing money to Addictions Services, having separate phone lines for the machines, paying for electricity to power the machines, and keeping a separate bank account for dealings with the Atlantic Lottery Corporation. After expenses, many club owners did not make significantly greater incomes than most of the other regularly employed persons in the region.

Despite the efforts of club owners to downplay the size of profits earned from the machines, some gamblers branded them as community-traitors for making money at the expense of the local people. Most of the Gamblers vastly overestimated the percentage of the profits that were allotted to the clubs. A few players even thought that the clubs had purchased the machines from the ALC, and were now the sole profiteers. One player who had formerly held this belief commented:

I figured at first that they had purchased the machines and that the bars were taking all the money in. And people still think that now, because they are always coming down on the bartenders and the bar owners. They think that those guys are making a fortune on it, but its not them that are making the fortune. There are bigger corporations, like the government. That's where the money is going. Some of it is going into the bar owners pocket but not nearly as much as most people think. Everybody thinks the bars run them. I mean realistically we know that its Atlantic Lottery because it's written right there, but we still think the bars are getting a bigger take than what they are letting on.

Most of the Gamblers simply dismissed the efforts of club owners to convince them that they only received twenty-four percent of the cut. Many thought that the bartenders who cited this figure were merely trying to steer the players away from the true percentages.

Part of the reason for this open disdain toward the bar owners may have been that they were regarded as being among the few people who had secure jobs in the region. As others were forced to contemplate an uncertain future, bar owners had been able to take advantage of the moratorium period, and profit immensely. Though a couple of club owners feared that they would not be able to survive once the TAGS program expired, most were fairly confident that, as long as there were people living on the Shore, they would be able to lure patrons into the clubs. As a result, most were able to enter into the moratorium period with little fear about the future of their livelihoods.

The reputation of one club owner as greedy had been substantiated in the minds of many players because of his apparent efforts to make them spend more money. When his club first received the machines that accepted bills directly, he had decided that he would no longer stock rolls of one and two dollar coins, even though the machines still allowed for coins to be inserted. This forced players to either find change elsewhere (not always an easy task in a small community), or play with bills. Most chose the latter option, but many found that playing with bills instead of

coins often led them to spend more than they wanted to. Also, when the club owner knew that heavy gamblers were playing, he would sometimes declare that he would not cash in a ticket that was worth less than twenty dollars. This forced players to try to win higher amounts, and often caused them to spend all of their winnings.

Despite these antics, many of the Gamblers said that they still liked the bartender. These persons tended to dismiss his behaviour as good-natured teasing. Although the bar owner's greed brought the disdain of many of the heavy Gamblers, and even lost him a few customers, most continued to frequent his club, on the grounds that they found it to be simply the nicest environment in which to play. This relationship bears a strong resemblance to the relationships between bingo club owners and players described by Rachael Dixey:

...players did not display sentimental attachment to their club, but acknowledged a pragmatic, symbiotic relationship based on practical needs. Players were blunt about the motives of club owners -- to make profits. Of one owner, a player said: 'Well, they say he's just been to Israel on our money, when he comes back with his lovely tan.' It's just a joke...we know that we spend our money here out of our own free will -- it's just a standing joke' (1996: 146).

b) Exploiting Insider Knowledge

Another complaint was that the bar staff had insider knowledge about how the VLTs operated. This allowed them to win a disproportionate share of the money that was paid out by the machines. The sorts of advantages which the bar staff were thought to hold took several forms. One of the most commonly agreed upon perks of the trade was that it exposed them to the receipts that were printed out by each machine. By looking at these slips, they could determine which machines were up or down the most money over the course of the day or week. This,

people believed, would help them to know which machine offered the best chance of paying out.¹⁰²

Two women expressed their frustration with the “cheating” of some bartenders:

The other players are disgusted with them. We're putting all our money in, and we don't know when the machine is ready to give the bells, or anything in regards to how much she takes in, because we don't see the tags. Those people work there. They take the stubs out so they know which game is going to give and roughly how much it will give. So they've got a big advantage.

There's people who run the machines at the bar who shouldn't be allowed to play. It's not fair for us. They obviously know which game is up money and which game is down money.

A second way in which club employees were thought to hold an upper hand was through “bonus robbing.” It was fairly common for certain bartenders to keep an eye on the machines to determine which ones had the highest bonuses.¹⁰³ Those bartenders would then congregate in the club after hours, or before the club opened in the morning, and try to win the highest bonuses by wagering the minimum bonus-yielding bet of forty cents.¹⁰⁴ This particularly enraged many of the Gamblers, who were often the ones who had built the bonuses up so high in the first place. Several Gamblers recited stories about days when they had left a large bonus on a machine at closing time, and had returned to the club when it opened the next day, only to find that the bonus had been won already.

These practices made most players very angry. Not only were the bartenders profiting

¹⁰²This notion rests on the belief that each machine operates independently of all others.

¹⁰³The value of the bonus was only displayed after the player had put money in the machine, and had set her bet to at least eight credits (\$0.40).

¹⁰⁴Because so many people were trying to win the bonus by betting one or two credits, the Atlantic Lottery Corporation recently altered all machines in the province, so that the bonus cannot be won with anything less than a bet of eight credits (\$0.40).

from the bar's cut of the proceeds, but they were also taking much more than their share of the prize-money. The frustration of the Gamblers was especially marked, because the ALC had made a well-known provision that bar employees were not allowed to play the machines. Although several of the Gamblers had confronted the bar employees about their behaviour, nobody had reported the illicit behaviour to the ALC or the provincial government. One player commented:

A lot of people do be quite upset, but there's not a lot we can do about it. One club has lost a couple of customers because of it. Everyone knows they do it but we just bicker and complain among ourselves. Several people have spoken to them about it, but they still do it.

The decision to not report the bartenders may be related to the taboo about informing on other community members, that exists in many outports (Okiehiro 1997).

Most of the bartenders in question said that they didn't believe that they had an unfair advantage. Many felt unjustly victimized by the accusations. One explained:

If they worked like people think they do, I'd never have to work a day in my life. I'd make so much money.

Another added:

There is a few that have let us know that they kind of resented us because we play. Some say, 'Maybe they'll get the bonus after we leave so I'm going to stay here and get it before I go.' I don't think seeing the slips matters, but some might think that we have an advantage because of that as well.

Most of the bartenders that did like to gamble on the machines said that, because of the hostilities of the Gamblers, they made a point of only playing when nobody else was around. That way, they wouldn't have to fend off as many accusations.

Interestingly, despite their economic stake in the provision of VLTs to area residents, many bartenders expressed feelings of sadness about their ambivalent predicament as both community

members and profiteers. These quotes are taken from the three primary bartenders in the region, two of whom were also part owners.

Sometimes it's heartbreaking because you know their circumstances. I've seen a lot of people who appeared to be spending most of their money. Sometimes you feel like saying something to them, but you can't because its their money. A lot of times, I feel bad because I make money off the games. I don't want people to lose their homes through the games, and I don't want to see families breaking up because of it.

There are a lot of people that I know could use the money better. I know a lot of their personal situations. Even though I am getting a profit, I don't want to make money from people who can't afford it. It's hard for me to say because my livelihood depends on people not cutting down, but I don't want to see anyone getting hurt.

I'm not going to turn down a dollar and I don't think too many other bars will either, but I don't like to see some people lose. I don't pay much attention. I feel better not knowing what they do. I'm hoping certain ones will win even though that's money I could have had. I wouldn't want to know that people are gambling instead of buying food, but I suppose that if they're losing money, they have to cut back on something.

For the most part, bartenders indicated that they were not happy with the effects that VLTs have brought upon their patrons. Most, however, accepted that having the machines was a necessary part of running a club in Newfoundland in the 1990s. Some said that they believed that even if they didn't offer the machines, another club would.

10.2.1.2 BLAMING THE ATLANTIC LOTTERY CORPORATION AND THE GOVERNMENT

Though a few players drew a distinction between the provincial government, the federal government, and the Atlantic Lottery Corporation, most players referred to them all under the general label: “*the government*.” Those that directed blame for their VLT-related problems at these organizations tended to focus on two main points. The first grievance was that government officials had unilaterally decided to put the machines on the Barren Shore in the first place. Some felt that this decision had come at great expense to many local residents. The second accusation

was that the government had continually modified the VLTs to better exploit the gambling public.

a) Introducing VLTs to the Barren Shore

Some of the Gamblers spoke disdainfully of the 'government' and the ALC for taking advantage of Shore residents during a vulnerable time, by introducing VLTs at the onset of the moratorium. For the most part, however, this blame was less severe than that was that directed at the club owners. This may be due to the fact that club owners present a familiar face at which to direct hostilities, whereas the ALC and the provincial government are faceless bureaucracies. As a result, club owners were often forced into the unenviable role of acting as a middle person between the ALC and the players, and were often left to absorb much of the criticism. A few players did, however, express open hostility toward the government for what they saw as a greedy ploy to benefit from the misfortunes of Barren Shore residents.

I don't know if the government is going to read this, but those games are going to be the ruination of everything. I know they are. It might not be today. It might not be tomorrow, but over time a lot of people will get hurt. A lot of people is after getting hurt now. I don't know why they would put them here...especially now!

While two players recognized VLTs as a means of diverting federal TAGS money into provincial government hands, most others thought that it was the same government body trying to get back what it had bestowed upon the residents of the Shore through the compensation programs. As one displaced fisherman and heavy gambler theorized:

Their aren't too many winners. The only winners are the people who invented them. They're probably sitting on a beach somewhere smiling from ear to ear. And, of course, the government. The government is happy because as long as you are on them machines, you're not breaking the law. You're not out tryin' to get more fish. And you're paying back to them the money they are after givin' you in check form. It all goes back in, probably the same night everybody gets their check. As soon as they do, they run straight for the machines.

b) Continually Changing the Machines to Better Exploit Players

The second bone of contention was that the government had continually modified the machines over time to make it harder for players to win money. Though the basic form of the VLTs had remained the same since their initial inception, several structural changes had been implemented over the years. Most players spoke of the evolution of the machines in terms of four distinct stages. The first group of machines featured wheels which spun much slower than the current ones do. Several players said that they believed that they had a greater accuracy in stopping the wheels on these early machines. This, they felt, was because it was possible to memorize the patterns of symbols on the wheels, and time their presses of the stop button accordingly. Whether this greater degree of control is real or illusory, it was generally agreed that it was easier to win money in the early days.

They used to pay higher. It was higher odds, I'm sure. I don't think that it was just because I gamble more now. Before you could get one machine to pay the bells four times in a two hour period. Now you can't even get the bells to pay them twice in a twenty-four hour period. All of my friends have said the same thing. We often discuss it as though it is a big conspiracy. We think they're trying to make us broke faster, because they keep changing the machines on us. Just when we have almost got them down pat.

The second set of machines did not allow for any stopping, whatsoever. This change was very unpopular with most of the players, because it took away the feeling that they had some influence over the result. This disapproval appears to have influenced the ALC in some way, because these machines proved to be very short-lived. They were soon replaced by a version of the modern Swinging Bells machine. This version brought back the stopping feature, but the wheels spun much faster than before.

In 1997, the machines were again amended to allow them to accept bills. Most players

found that these newest machines were by far the most difficult to win on. Several reasons were cited for this. Firstly, many felt that the tremendous speed at which the wheels spun on these new machines made it impossible to achieve the level of skill that was offered by the first set of machines. Secondly, it was thought that the new machines made it much more difficult to get the swinging bells. When they did give the bells, there were more “dry runs” than before.¹⁰⁵

Dry runs are pretty common here lately. Before we used to do really well. I've seen as high as five or six bells coming down in the fever. But they upgraded the games and I guess they put different chips in them so the fever mode is completely different now. Bells are few and far between in the fever now. That's all part of the scam.

Another common complaint was that the bill acceptors that the ALC installed on the machines had led to a situation in which players were losing their money much faster, and getting much less fun out of their investments.

10.2.2 BLAMING ‘GAMBLING ADDICTION’

The feelings of guilt that overspenders faced were also counteracted, somewhat, by an emerging awareness of the notion of ‘gambling addiction.’ This follows an epistemological shift that has occurred on an international scale over the past three decades toward viewing heavy gambling as an uncontrollable disease, rather than as a sin or a moral weakness, as had been previously argued (Rose 1988). Proponents of the ‘medical model,’ or ‘disease model,’ of gambling behaviour contend that people who consistently gamble to the point of bringing financial or personal hardships upon themselves or their families, do so because they are at the mercy of an underlying disease, variously referred to as ‘compulsive,’ ‘problem,’ or ‘pathological’ gambling

¹⁰⁵ “Dry runs” were situations in which the fever mode did not offer any bells, whatsoever. In these situations, the payout for hitting the bells is considerably smaller than it would be if one or more bells were given.

(American Psychiatric Association 1980; Custer 1982; Lesieur and Custer 1984; Blume 1987; Gambler's Anonymous 1996). Whereas previous generations have freely condemned heavy gamblers for their behaviour, the medical model locates blame in a "sickness" which has overtaken the gambler (Rose 1988). This sickness is not seen as being common to all gamblers, but rather plagues only certain select persons. Thus, the medical model imposes a strict dichotomy between 'normal' controlled gamblers and 'sick' or 'pathological' uncontrolled gamblers (Błaszczynski and McConaghy 1989).

One of the strongest advocates of the medical model is the organization Gambler's Anonymous (GA), an internationally established support group for persons wishing to stop gambling. The GA doctrine takes the position that "compulsive" gambling "is an illness, progressive in its nature, which can be arrested but never cured" (GA 1996, 8). Those suffering from this illness must accept that they are "very sick people" who are "powerless over gambling" and can have no hope of ever being able to "gamble normally again" (Ibid., 4; 8; 13). Thus, the only conceivable goal is complete abstinence from all forms of gambling (McCormick and Brown 1987). The successful lobbying of Gambler's Anonymous and other proponents of the medical model resulted in the inclusion of "pathological gambling" in the American Psychiatric Association's DSM III in 1980 (American Psychiatric Association 1980).

The addiction paradigm also appears to have disseminated into most provincial government strategies for dealing with those who wish to stop gambling. Almost all funding for the management of gambling problems in Canada is delegated to addiction counsellors. Most of these counsellors were already in the employment of the provinces to counsel people with problems

related to excessive alcohol or drug use.¹⁰⁶ In Newfoundland, all addiction counsellors were required to complete a short training course to enable them to cope with problems specifically related to gambling. As a supplement to counselling, most addiction programs recommend that clients also attend Gambler's Anonymous meetings, if a local GA chapter is in place.¹⁰⁷

The assumptions underlying the medical model also appear to have percolated into the minds of many of the Gamblers on the Shore, whether through media publicity, Gambler's Anonymous, or the literature of addiction research professionals. This was evident in the comments of one Gambler, who remarked:

In the past couple of years it's just sickness. I just don't want to be in it any more, but I know I'm not going to stop.

Several Gamblers spoke of addiction as a likely, or even inevitable outcome of prolonged play.

There's some kind of pull that's there, driving people to the games. I've seen it. People win and then put money back in. We've all done it. That's kind of upsetting, because if you were lucky enough to win, you shouldn't go and put it all back. I think it's like a drug addiction or something — smoking, drinking. If you're an addictive person, you're going to get addicted to it. You get a taste of it. You like it. And you say you're gonna give it up, but you just don't.

Many of the core group of heavy players had taken to using the word 'addiction' among themselves to describe their predicament.

We know that we're all fucking hooked and that's the only bond we have. Yeah we're all horribly addicted, but we just laugh and make fun of it.

For the most part, players tended to describe these 'addictions' in reference to the

¹⁰⁶In Newfoundland and Labrador, the first government funded counselling service for people with gambling problems was established in 1995.

¹⁰⁷Newfoundland and Labrador is no exception to this rule. The vast majority of all provincial expenditures for helping those with gambling problems are allocated to Addiction Services outlets throughout the province.

psychological or physiological states aroused by playing VLTs. The specifics of the desired state of arousal to which players claimed to be addicted varied somewhat, however. Several spoke of being addicted to such things as the lights, sounds, and colours produced by VLTs. Some said that it was the rush they experienced when they hit the swinging bells. Others looked to the relaxation-inducing properties of the machines.

One experience, which was often taken as clear evidence of addiction was having dreams about the machines. Sixty-eight percent of the interviewees (17/25) reported dreaming about playing the machines, or about the images and sounds emitted by VLTs, on at least one occasion. Some said that they would relive the day's VLT session while they were sleeping. Others would imagine the experience of winning or losing large sums of money. Still others would dream about the colours and music associated with the swinging bells. One man, who was particularly prone to dreaming, explained:

You'd lie down my son and you could hear the bells ringing in your ears. That's what's driving people over the edge. Just to hear them bells ringing. That's what's keeping the people going. Those bells drive you mad. Once you see those bells, that's in your sleep. That's the hook.

Another man said that he was more apt to have day dreams about the machines, but that the images he saw were as clear as when he was asleep.

I used to see the bells and hear them ringing while I was at work. It's just like picking blueberries. When you get home, all you can see is blueberries. That happened a lot.

Similarly, one player speculated that it was the repetitiveness of the activity that led her to think about it afterwards. She likened it to the assembly line work she had done at the local crab plant, the memories of which also stayed with her well after the activity was completed. One of the heaviest players said that she tended to dream less when she had won money, because her mind

was at ease, but when she had lost a lot of money she had very restless sleeps and was often tortured by nightmares.

When I lose, I don't sleep very much. I'm awake every two seconds. When I do fall asleep, I have horrible dreams about what I did. Eventually, I wakes up and feels right guilty about it. I says to myself: 'I'm addicted, I know I'm addicted.'

A related experience, which was also taken by many as proof of addiction was “craving” the experience of playing VLTs. Several of the players said that they were often struck by overpowering urges to play. Despite their efforts to resist, they were usually overcome by these desires. Some players indicated that they thought about playing every day, and would play much more often if they could afford to. Most said that they found it very difficult to drive past the club without “*stopping in for a few spins.*” It was quite common for these players to say when they arrived at the club that the machines had been “*calling them*” to play. One man explained:

When I first started, winning was everything. You always wanted to win. Now, you just play them because your addicted, I guess. Something comes in your mind. You get the itch that you want to play. You just have to get there. You need to get your fix. I think about them virtually 24 hours a day. A lot of people do. If I have the money I'll never refuse the games. I'm always in the mood for that. Some days, I've been out fishing and I couldn't wait to get back in to play. You wanted to get in, get your money and go. It's unbelievable how it can draw you right in.

In a similar vein, another Gambler said:

I always joke that they put something in the machines that lulls you into a trance after you stare at it for a while and it keeps drawing you back and drawing you back. I've heard people saying that they heard the machines calling them to come in. It's something in your head. I feel drawn to it. I can't see it (the attraction) being the money, because last week I took a hundred and eighty dollars out of the machines and I played it back. And I needed that hundred and eighty dollars really bad. The machines were just calling me.

Some players said that when they didn't play for a long period of time, they grew irritable, and often directed their frustrations at those around them. A few players said that these

“*withdrawal symptoms*” reminded them of what they had heard about withdrawal from drug dependency. One woman, who had been a regular intravenous drug user at one point in her life, recounted the feelings that had accompanied her decision to try to quit playing:

I can't stop. If I didn't go at least once a month, I'd probably fucking eat somebody. I'd be so crooked. I don't know what motivates me or what keeps me there. Its just that I can't stop. I feel like I could give it up for six or seven weeks but if I told myself consciously that I've got to stop playing, I get this awful feeling in my stomach. Even though I don't go as frequently as I used to, the thought of not playing anymore is horrible. It's emotional but it's almost physical. Like, I crave the machines. You know, just like if you didn't have your fix. It's as bad as my drug addiction. It's as bad as my drinking. It's as bad as my thoughts of giving up smoking. It's as bad as anything I have ever been addicted to or been involved with. It wears you down bit by bit.

Though a number of players expressed sentiments of this nature, few could put their finger on what it was about playing that they had grown so attached to. Most of these persons said that they didn't know why they continued to play. For the most part, players simply accepted that they had become addicted to the feeling of playing, and that this addiction would inevitably supercede any efforts they made to keep their gambling under control.

10.2.2.1 THE MEDICALIZATION OF DEVIANCE

In opposition to the medical model, several scholars have argued that uncontrolled gambling is not the result of an addiction. Rather, it is a social problem that has been ‘medicalized.’ Medicalization refers to the process by which certain behaviour patterns come to be thought of as biomedical illnesses (Conrad and Schneider 1980; Rosencrance 1985). In recent decades, the disease label has been tenuously applied to a wide range of socially deviant practices including certain forms of sexual conduct, criminal behaviour, the use of drugs and alcohol, and child ‘hyperactivity,’ just to name a few (Foucault 1977; 1978; Conrad and Schneider 1980; Toby

1998).

Medicalization theories are grounded in the belief that the larger society provides individuals with a repertoire of meanings through which to interpret their experiences. It follows that it is predominately the society that defines whether or not a person may become addicted to a particular activity, rather than any inherent characteristics of the activity itself.

Although, in Canada at least, the partaking in games of chance may be regarded as less deviant than once was the case, many scholars have taken to applying the medicalization label to the notion of gambling addiction. Most of these theorists have argued that some gamblers learn to define themselves as addicts over time (Livingston 1974; Oldman 1978; Kusyszyn 1979; Apt and McGurrian 1989). D.J. Oldman (1978), one of the strongest critics of the medical model, has asserted that the only difference between so-called 'compulsive gamblers' and 'non-compulsive gamblers' is that the former group have adopted a "rhetoric of compulsion." In assuming this role, these players have come to accept a set of beliefs about themselves which, in turn, define the way that they gamble in the future.

10.2.2.1.1 THE MEDICALIZATION OF VLT GAMBLING PROBLEMS IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Whether or not the cravings described by many of the Gamblers are, in fact, symptomatic of an underlying physiological or psychological dependence is beyond the grasp of this project. What is clear, however, is that many of the Gamblers have adopted the addiction metaphor as their primary, if not their sole, explanation for their continual overspending on the machines. Furthermore, the term 'addiction' is used freely by addiction research professionals, provincial government officials, and members of the mass media in Newfoundland and Labrador to describe

the impact that VLTs have had on a segment of the population. While this surprising consensus between these diverse groups may be a testament to the validity of the addiction concept, it is important to recognize that conceiving of gambling problems as medical problems does not threaten the interests of any of these parties. Some may even have a vested interest in viewing problem gambling in this light.

The notion of gambling addiction eases the tension brought by heavy losses, because it gives the gambler the opportunity to place part of the blame on the disease. John Rosencrance (1985) has made the argument that: "...the sick generally are not held morally responsible for their illness. When troubled gamblers accept a disease label, they are able to absolve themselves partially of guilt and responsibility for misdeeds" (1985: 278). I would suggest that this type of thought process may also be at work in these outport communities. Though many Gamblers continued to suffer immense grief about their episodes of overspending, some of those who believed themselves to be suffering from a disease seemed to feel partially relieved of responsibility for their losses of control. This point is evident in this passage taken from one Gambler who was struggling to control his spending:

Of course, it's up to the individual. You've got a choice of if you want to play or not. But what are you supposed to do when you get addicted?

Most addictions counsellors in Canada have also been active promulgators of the medical model, although Addictions Services counselling programs in Newfoundland do emphasize some of the social dimensions of 'problem gambling' as well. It may be, as some have argued, that these counsellors have a vested interest in the promotion of a discourse of addiction in reference to gambling, because it helps them to secure added funding from governments, and increases their job

security (Perrier Mandal et al. 1999). Even if one takes a less cynical stance, it must be acknowledged that the medical model is easily assimilable into the conceptual frameworks employed by these counsellors in their work with substance addiction. Since most addiction counsellors across Canada have only been delegated to deal with gambling problems in recent years, it is not surprising that they have approached the task in the same way they would ‘addictions’ to alcohol and other drugs.

The success that Gambler’s Anonymous has had in promoting the disease model, and the importance of abstinence as a treatment goal, should not be underestimated. Elements of the GA doctrine are present in most subsequent efforts to assist persons who feel that their gambling is out of control. Nowhere is this influence more evident than in the Addictions Services distributed Ontario Intergroup brochure, Gambling and Symptoms of Relapse, which cautions gamblers: “...remember you have a progressive disease and will be in worse shape if you relapse” (Ontario Intergroup 1995). This, of course, bears strong resemblance to GA’s designation of compulsive gambling as a “progressive illness.” The same brochure features the Gambler’s Anonymous/Alcoholic’s Anonymous “Serenity Prayer” on its cover. It reads:

God grant me the serenity to accept
the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference (1995).

Provincial government representatives have also tended to be staunch supporters of the medical model. This may be due to the fact that the perspective draws such a sharp distinction between the so-called ‘normal’ gamblers and the so-called ‘compulsive’ gamblers. If the government can make the case that those who routinely gamble beyond desired levels do so

because they are predisposed to do so by an inner compulsion, they can also make the case that legalizing gambling does not pose a threat to the majority of the population, who do not have addictive personalities. By this logic, it may be argued that those who have developed gambling 'addictions' would likely find some other self-destructive outlet if VLT gambling were to be taken away. It is, therefore, unfair to deprive the many responsible gamblers of enjoyment to compensate for the failings of a select few. This point was expressed by former Finance Minister Paul Dicks in an interview with a local newspaper. Dicks explained:

I think at issue is that you have addictive personalities...I'm not sure the machines are the problem so much as the people who are attracted to this form of entertainment who devote too much of their time or income to it (Dicks in LeBlanc 1999, 1).

The revenues that follow from the provision of legalized gambling to the population more than make up for the cost of paying counsellors, most of whom are already employed to handle a variety of other afflictions.

Lastly, the addiction concept appears to have been accepted by many Canadian journalists, including those in Newfoundland and Labrador (Cleary 1997; LeBlanc 1999). Even those wishing to condemn the government for making VLTs available to the public have employed the medical model, suggesting that the government has greedily inflicted the machines upon helpless addicts. Some have embraced the popular phrase 'the crack cocaine of gambling' to refer to VLTs, because of the quick speed of each play, and the supposed capacity of the machines to hook players instantly.

It may be that these groups have created a mutually reinforcing set of meanings, which inhibit the formulation of alternative explanations for uncontrolled gambling. At present, heavy VLT players in Newfoundland do not have easy access to any alternate ways of conceptualizing

their behaviour.

10.2.2.2 THE ROLE OF SOCIAL FACTORS IN KEEPING GAMBLERS INVOLVED

A major shortcoming of the addiction paradigm is that it tends to minimize the role that social and situational variables play in making it difficult for people to quit or to gamble in a more controlled manner. Accordingly, some gamblers rationalize that if they are not able to quit cold turkey, they must be addicted. While it goes without question that many players are deeply attracted to the psychological experience of playing VLTs, most players are also bound to the machines by a wide array of other factors, some of which have very little to do with the games themselves. As one player pointed out:

Yeah, there is an attraction to the games, but it's not only the physical responses you have. It is so much more. It is an environmental thing. It's a social thing. It's a generational thing. It is way different than a drug or alcohol addiction that way.

In this section, I want to call attention to what I believe are two of the most important social factors in sabotaging Gamblers' efforts to quit playing VLTs: their dependence on the social milieu of the club, and their social and emotional ties to the other Gamblers. Based on this research, it would seem that a successful paradigm for assisting outport Newfoundlanders to corral their gambling will have to incorporate an understanding of the importance of these dimensions to the overall appeal of the playing experience.

10.2.2.2.1 DEPENDENCE ON THE SOCIAL MILIEU OF THE CLUB

One of the greatest obstacles for Gamblers wishing to stop playing VLTs was their attachment to the social milieu of the club. As discussed in Chapters Three and Four, the club served a number of important functions for many of the Gamblers. These roles extended far beyond its place as a venue for playing VLTs. For several of the Gamblers who failed in their efforts to

quit, it was as much their attraction to these other functions of the club as their attraction to the machines that eventually prompted them to return to playing.

As mentioned, thirteen of the twenty-five interviewees (52%) were neither married, nor engaged in common-law relationships. For many of these persons, the club had come to serve as an essential vehicle for meeting prospective mates or lovers. This function was particularly valuable for unemployed people, or people working in highly gender-stratified industries, such as the fishery. Even those that weren't specifically seeking romantic companionship through the club, found that it provided them with an essential form of social interaction which was otherwise missing from their lives. One single father expounded upon this point:

I mean sure I've got the kids and all, but let me tell you my friend, this is some lonely life. It just isn't the same as having a woman around to talk to and to share your life with. Everybody needs some kind of outlet. At least the club gives you that. It's a place to go and be with your peer group for a while.

Furthermore, many players had grown accustomed to going to the club for other social events, such as dances and dart tournaments. Some feared that, in giving up the machines, they would have to give up these activities as well, because the temptation to play VLTs would be too great. One Gambler said that it was usually when one of these activities drew him back to the club that his resolve was overcome, and he went back to playing.

I've given them up completely for a couple of months and then, just when you think you've got control over it, you go up there, maybe to a dance on a Saturday night with no intentions of playing the fucking things. And all of a sudden, you get an urge to put in five dollars and five becomes ten, and so on. That's how it always seems to happen.

As discussed in Chapter Seven, some people had grown accustomed to using the club as a place to go to get away from their spouses, children, or elderly relatives for a while, or to get problems off of their minds. Because there were so few public gathering places in the area that did

not house the machines, those who tried to quit often expressed frustration that they were not able to find alternate places to go in these moments.

10.2.2.2.2 SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL TIES TO OTHER PLAYERS

A second factor in undermining efforts to control gambling expenditures was the emotional tie that many Gamblers had formed to the others in the group. Most of the Gamblers had formed a strong network of friends through playing VLTs. Several said that most of their closest friends were VLT players, or at least regular club goers. This corresponds with Howard Becker's (1960) argument that deep involvement in one community of people tends to take up a great deal of a person's time, energy and economic resources. This, in turn, leaves fewer opportunities to develop other commitments. This type of framework has been applied to heavy gambling by Rosencrance (1986), who has shown that many heavy gamblers do not pursue other interests, nor do they commit themselves to other activities. Accordingly, most of their friends and acquaintances are tied to the gambling scene.

For many people, the bond with other Gamblers was made even stronger by their shared experience of the economic uncertainty that characterized life in the region. Perhaps because of the social influence of the TAGS recipients in the group, many Gamblers had become heavily involved with the machines at about the same time (between 1994 and 1996). As discussed in Chapter Two, when my research began in the summer of 1998, many of the people who had received TAGS payments were anticipating the significant reductions in income that were expected to follow the end of the program. The shared anxiety brought by this situation also strengthened the sense of comradery between players. Their continued membership in the *communitas* of the gambling circle restored their faith that they were not alone in their worries about the future.

The end of TAGS also prompted several Gamblers to speak more actively about the need to cut down on their playing. Some were making concerted efforts to set limits on their spending on the VLTs, or to avoid the machines altogether when they went to the club. Most found it difficult to do this, however, because they had grown so accustomed to spending heavily on the machines. Aside from their temptation to play the machines, many had developed reputations as big spenders and found it very difficult to alter their club identities. Some complained of peer pressure from their fellows to resume their old spending patterns. Songbird described her difficulty in redefining herself within the context of the bar after she had decided to cut down.

Lately, I have been trying to just spend the money I had set aside and then leave, but most people won't let you off that easy. They try to stop you from leaving. They lend you money and everything. Sometimes, they'll even put bills directly into your machine. They just don't want you to go. It's madness. It's like 'Oh no, you're sharing in this misery right now.' They find ways of making you stay. Well, they don't make you stay, but they goad you because they know that you're so god damn weak, because you're there in the first place. The heavy gamblers that I know say that we want to quit all the time. We all say it to each other. But then somebody comes into a big windfall and lends us all two hundred bucks. That defeats the purpose.

It may be that moderate spending by one member of the group represented a challenge to the collective identity that had been forged by the Gamblers. Efforts to cut down may be regarded as self-righteousness, a silent condemnation of the behaviour of those who continued to gamble heavily. Those Gamblers who had been less successful in decreasing their spending may have felt judged by this behaviour, and made efforts to keep their friends involved.

10.3 LOCAL INITIATIVES FOR CONTROLLING GAMBLING PROBLEMS

In contrast to the external blamers, some players had maintained an internal locus of control. These persons regarded overspending as a behavioural problem which they had the power to control. To this end, some had experimented with new techniques to help keep their gambling

within acceptable limits. Though few of these techniques proved successful in the long run, a handful of players had eventually been able to reduce their gambling to more affordable levels or stop playing altogether. In this section, I will review some of the strategies that were employed.

10.3.1 TIME AND MONEY MANAGEMENT

The most widely employed strategy for controlling gambling expenditures was to set a spending limit before playing. As was previously discussed, however, several players had recognized that they were rarely able to stick to their budget in practice. As a way of overcoming this problem, a few players had taken to leaving their wallets or purses at home, and bringing only what they were prepared to spend. Though several Gamblers admitted to having gone home to get more money in these situations, most of those that had tried it had found that this tactic worked reasonably well. As one player explained:

If you go there with only twenty or thirty dollars in your pocket, you know that when that's gone, that's it. You've got to make a special effort to get more and, by that time, you usually realize that it's not a good idea to go back.

A related technique which one player described was to go to the club a half an hour before last call. That way, he knew that he would be forced to stop before he got carried away and spent too much.

Another form of money management which two players employed was to increase their stake, the size of their bets, and/or their frequency of play when they were on a winning streak, or when they had a more secure source of income, and decrease their stake, the size of their bets, and/or their play frequency when they were on a losing streak, or were receiving less income.

There's an old saying that you cut the garment to the cloth, right. If you've got decent money coming in, you don't mind putting fifty or a hundred dollars in the game, right. But if you've only got a little less coming in, you'll still get your kick, but you'll try not to spend the same amount of money. It's like anything else. A hundred dollars to a rich man is like ten to a poor... The amount that I play also depends on how I'm doing. Lately, I've been on a lucky streak, so I played three times last week. If I suddenly got onto a losing streak, I'd probably try to cut back to a day or two a week.

Another method which three of Gamblers had tried was locking their money away in a place where they couldn't access it. Two had decided to leave complete control over their finances to their spouses. Both of these men felt that they could trust their wives to only give them small amounts to gamble with, and withhold the rest. While this worked fairly well for one person, the other found it problematic, because his wife was a gambler as well. She occasionally broke down and gave him more than they had agreed on. The third player had put her money into a savings account with severe penalties for withdrawing it prematurely. Though she said that this worked fairly well for a while, she eventually went back to gambling heavily, once she had access to the money again.

10.3.2 WITHDRAWING FROM THE GAMBLING SCENE

A common characteristic of all of the players who had been successful in quitting or cutting back significantly was that they had all withdrawn themselves from the gambling scene for a prolonged period. Those Gamblers that did manage to stay away from the clubs often had to make major efforts to restructure their lives. The ones that sought to stop going to clubs altogether also had to give up a great many other social activities, which took place in clubs. This would not be as true for persons living in urban settings, who might simply move to an establishment which did not house the machines, or take up a different hobby.

The lack of leisure alternatives on the Shore meant that many of those who quit were forced to try to find new ways of busying themselves, which did not involve the club. One man spoke of the sacrifices made by one of his friends who had given up the machines:

When it gets to a certain point, you just have to stay clear of the clubs, because the games is in the clubs. When you go in there, it's like they are calling you. One friend of mine had to give up going to the clubs because she got so heavily into the games. She had to change her whole fucking lifestyle, right. She had always gone to the club the scattered¹⁰⁸ time. She liked to go for the dances, or for the scattered band. And she gave it all up,...,all through them fucking games.

One man went so far as to ask all of the area bartenders to deny him access to the clubs for a two month period. Though he had eventually returned to playing in a more regulated fashion, he said that he would have no shame in getting himself barred from the clubs all over again, if he found that he was losing control. Another Gambler had quit both of the dart leagues that she was involved in so that she would not be tempted by the machines. She had only gone back to the club a few times since then, for special occasions. Another had moved to St. John's to work for a few months, and had taken advantage of her new lifestyle to regain control over her habit. When she returned home, she did not resume her old club persona. Instead, she worked to rekindle old friendships that she had lost touch with while she was gambling.

It is not surprising that several of those who had been able to give up playing for the longest periods were those who had worked or lived in other parts of the country for extended periods of time. These persons had the advantage of being immersed in completely different lifestyles, which did not include the machines and, in some cases, did not include clubs at all. They were also away from the peer group that they had grown accustomed to playing with. Both of the Gamblers who

¹⁰⁸In this context, the term "scattered" means "occasional."

were regularly going away to work at the time of the study said that playing VLTs was something they associated with being home, and that they rarely thought of them while they were away.

Most players who decided to quit said that this was a particularly difficult decision to make, because it meant giving up their link to their entire community of friends. This was the eventual decision of Songbird, who expressed mixed feelings about her decision to drop out of the club scene.

Quitting is really difficult because you have to give up your tie to this wonderful group of people. You see, we've all stuck together through thick and thin. You hate to have to say 'Look, I'm quitting,' because then you're a quitter in that respect. And once you're shunned by the crowd that drinks and gambles, you just don't have an in anymore. I know cause I've done it. I feel bad about it. I really warred and struggled with myself to stop. And it doesn't matter what anybody thinks, I stopped. With my friends that come by now, I just say: 'Fuck you. If you don't like me anymore just because I won't gamble with you, then you're not fucking worth it.' But it hurts. I'm not part of a circle anymore. There's just nothing else anybody else is involved in here. It's crazy. It's like paying your social dues.

Those who quit faced an added problem because they could never completely escape their prior image. Nor could they completely avoid interactions with the members of the group to which they had once belonged. Their sporadic meetings with old gambling friends presented recurrent temptations to resume their old lifestyles. This problem was faced by Songbird who was finally persuaded to return to her old club after nine months of complete abstinence.

I hadn't played in nine months and had been trying to keep a low profile. When my friend talked me into going back to the club for my birthday, I was flocked. People were left standing up at the counter waiting to buy drinks, because every one of the three bartenders had come over to talk to me. All of my old gang was there asking me what had been going on. People were giving me money and everything. It was madness. The first thing they wanted to know was whether I was playing again. Were you playing in town? Where have you been? Where do you play now? It was amazing. I was still in the circle. I could go back tomorrow and it would be just like I had never left.

Though Songbird has been able to stay away, the temptation to resume playing overcame most of those that tried to stop. Many of these people found that many of the problems that initially led them to become involved in the VLT community, such as boredom, loneliness and depression had returned after they had dropped out of the circle. Unlike Songbird, however, most gamblers did not recognize the extent to which factors other than their supposed addiction contributed to their unhappiness. Thus, failed attempts to quit only reinforced their belief that they were addicted.

10.4 PROBLEMS RELATED TO THE ASSUMPTION OF THE ADDICT ROLE

Several Gamblers appeared to have accepted the Gambler's Anonymous rhetoric that they their only hope of regaining control over their lives was to surrender to the fact that they would always be 'sick,' and strive for complete abstinence from gambling. The problem was that very few of the Gamblers on the Shore had easy access to government services or to the emotional support needed to help them to implement this philosophy. Furthermore, their emotional ties to the other Gamblers, and to the services provided by the club created strong pressures to continue gambling.

The repeated failures that some of the Gamblers experienced when trying to abstain from gambling led to a crippling loss of their sense of self-control. Some Gamblers found themselves locked in a self-defeating cycle. Attempts to quit were eventually overcome due to boredom, loneliness, peer pressure, unmanageable life stresses, or nostalgia for the experience of playing. Eventually, they returned to gambling, often at even higher levels than they had before.

This point is also made by Rosencrance. He writes: "The single criterion of abstinence presently advanced by treatment programs has limitations and in some cases may be counterproductive to the effective treatment of problem gambling" (1985: 280). Several researchers have shown that the goal of abstinence is unrealistic for many gamblers. While they

may be successful in giving up gambling for a while, major relapses are very common (Scodel 1964; Ashton 1979; Rosencrance 1985). When this happens, it is not uncommon for players to return to gambling with unbridled vigour, as they delight in "...the voluptuousness of giving oneself up for lost" (Halliday and Fuller 1974: 24).

Those Gamblers who had lost their faith in their capacities to control themselves often experienced problems with low self-esteem. As Alexandra King wrote of her experiences as a VLT player struggling to regain control: "...the gambler begins to believe that she is an awful person, whose character defect will not allow her to control her life" (1999: 175). This phenomenon was evident in the lives of many frustrated Gamblers who were beginning to lose their faith in their abilities to control themselves in other respects. One man explained:

When you can't control your urges, you start to put yourself in a different category. If you can't control your gambling, then you've got to pretty much sympathize with people who can't control their sexual urges or something. It's a sickness. You start to see yourself in a different light.

Several players said that since they began to lose control of their gambling, they were finding that they were more willing to engage in forms of behaviour that they might have previously deemed unacceptable. Songbird said that she felt that her sense of honesty suffered when she was gambling heavily. She said:

I found a wallet with three hundred dollars in it a little while ago, and I turned it into the police. If you asked me whether I would have done it when I was gambling really heavily, I'd have to say that I don't know, but I doubt that I would have.

One young woman said that she had grown much less discerning about who she was willing to sleep with in recent months, because she had completely lost control of her gambling, and her sense of self-worth had suffered accordingly.

You feel like you've hit rock bottom...Like you're not worthy of anything better than the pathetic life you've got.

Other Gamblers had turned to adultery since they had started gambling heavily. Six of the twenty-five Gamblers (24%) were widely rumoured to be having one or more extra-marital affairs. Two of these persons had done so quite publicly, despite the fact that they feared for the consequences that this behaviour might have for their spouses and children. One woman reflected:

A lot of us have lost our sense of integrity. We have done things that we would never have done before. We have lost our sense of where the boundaries are. The Gamblers were all respectable people. You see, people on this shore do have clear ideas of what is right and wrong, and what sort of behaviour is acceptable for certain people. When you started to see the human failings, it began to get ugly. Some of us began to engage in behaviour that we would never have engaged in otherwise. We lost who we were.

Others said that they were finding it much harder to show restraint in their drinking, smoking, or drug use since their gambling had gotten out of control.

It appears that the promotion of the medical model, to the neglect of all other explanations, has done a disservice to some players, because it has undermined any power that they may have had to learn to control their gambling by themselves. This, in turn, has created a secondary problem for several people, as they have lost faith in their capacity to control their impulses generally.

By contrast, most players who were able to maintain an internal locus of control sought to find creative new ways of regulating their behaviour. Consequently, these persons were generally more successful in moderating their spending or quitting altogether. As will be discussed in Chapter Eleven, the importance of assuming an internal locus of control may be all the more important in a place like the Barren Shore, where the availability of services for problem gamblers is quite limited.

Chapter Eleven

A SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS: GOVERNMENT SERVICES, LOCAL REACTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES FOR THE FUTURE

This chapter outlines the strategy adopted by the government of Newfoundland for dealing with gambling problems among the populace. The primary component of this strategy is the provision of addiction counsellors to "Community Health" offices, which are located in regional centres throughout the province. While the counsellors in the regional centre closest to the Barren Shore were stretched beyond their limits by the demands of people living in the centre, none of the players interviewed had sought external help. This was due to a variety of factors, including: a lack of awareness that services were available, the commuting distance to the counselling site, the difficulty of ensuring anonymity, and the social stigma associated with seeking external assistance.

The second part of the chapter draws upon the input of the group of Gamblers in forwarding some possible complimentary strategies, which may be better suited to their needs. While most thought that it would be possible to make major improvements to the current system, the majority of those interviewed doubted whether very many people would be willing to seek external assistance under any circumstances. Several players expressed the view that players should be left alone to struggle with their gambling problems by themselves.

These findings suggest that the provincial government could benefit from a broader perspective in its approach to problem gambling. While the current treatment strategy of abstinence and in depth counselling may work for some players, it may also be helpful to make efforts to assist those gamblers for whom abstinence is not a realizable goal to learn to gamble in a more controlled fashion. This might be a more workable solution for persons who are unwilling or unable to take

advantage of counselling services. It may also be useful to publicize more information about the roles played by social involvement and cognitive misconceptions in bringing about situations of overspending.

11.1 THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT STRATEGY FOR ASSISTING PEOPLE WITH GAMBLING PROBLEMS

All funding for the management of gambling problems in Newfoundland and Labrador is delegated to "Addictions Services," a division of "Community Health." The annual three hundred thousand dollar budget which the organization receives to treat people with gambling problems consists of one hundred and fifty thousand from provincial government coffers¹⁰⁹ and an additional hundred and fifty thousand which is extracted from the profits of the beverage industry¹¹⁰ (National Council of Welfare 1996). As of 1996, the distribution of this money was as follows: 80 percent for the treatment of people with gambling problems (most of this money went toward paying the salaries of counsellors), 10 percent for prevention (Primarily the printing and distribution of five brochures about gambling problems), 3.7 percent for training counsellors, 3.3 percent for research, and 3.0 percent for policy development (Ibid.). Recent interviews with Addiction Services representatives indicated that this figure has changed little since the NCW report was published.

Since 1995, Addictions Services has offered individual and familial outpatient counselling for people living with gambling problems. This service is available through fourteen outlets throughout the province. In extreme cases, gamblers may be admitted to the Humberwood

¹⁰⁹This represented 0.06 percent of the \$239.7 million dollars that the province received in gambling revenues during the 1998-1999 fiscal year.

¹¹⁰This amounts to about one percent of the VLT revenues taken in by these establishments (Perrier Mandal et al. 1999).

Program in Corner Brook, which pursues a more intensive inpatient treatment strategy (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Health and Community Services 1999a). Also, where the demand is sufficient, regional offices are authorized to facilitate group counselling. In practice, however, few offices have put this service into practice.¹¹¹

By 1998, all Addictions Services counsellors across the province had been given some training to assess and treat gambling problems. Six full time gambling counsellors had been hired, and delegated to six different regions of the province. The Addiction Services outlet in the regional centre nearest the Barren Shore had one full time gambling counsellor on staff, and another counsellor was based at a second office which was about a ninety minute drive from the Shore. When my research began in 1998, the waiting list for counselling was between six and eight months.¹¹²

In addition to counselling, Addictions Services has distributed five brochures which deal specifically with gambling problems. The titles of these documents are: Gambling... When It's No Longer a Game! (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Health and Community Services 1998a), Gambling and Youth (1998b), When a Loved One Gambles Too Much... (1999b), Seniors and Gambling (1999c), and Gambling and Symptoms of Relapse (Ontario Intergroup 1995). Most of these brochures discuss issues related to what they term "problem

¹¹¹More commonly, gamblers and/or their families are referred to Gambler's Anonymous or GamAnon (a support group for the families of people with gambling problems), if local chapters are in place (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Health and Community Services 1998a; 1999b). At the time of writing, GA was operating in St. John's and Corner Brook only. A small GA chapter operated in the regional centre for the Barren Shore for seven months in 1997, but was eventually abandoned.

¹¹²This figure compared closely with those of most Addictions Services outlets in the province.

gambling.” The definition of this term varies somewhat from one document to another, however. In one case, it is defined very generally: “any gambling behaviour which adversely affects significant areas of a person’s life, including their mental health, physical health, employment, family relationships, financial and legal status” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Health and Community Services 1999c). In another publication, a much more specific description is offered.

Problem gamblers play and continue to play games of chance. They gamble longer than intended with more money than intended. It does not matter if they are winning or losing. All that matters is the action. The action begins with thinking about gambling, the gambling event and the win or lose result. Some people are unable to control the urge to gamble. They crave and become dependent upon the action which provides excitement and an escape from reality. They chase their losses with more bets and soon debts grow. Problem gambling can make life very difficult. Besides creating money problems, problem gambling can cause trouble in the family and at work. For the problem gambler, it can cause trouble with the law, as well with one’s mental and physical health (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Health and Community Services 1998a).

Whereas the former definition presents a wide set of criteria by which someone may be defined as a problem gambler, the latter implies that a certain set of characteristics are common to most, if not all, problem gamblers. While the former describes problem gambling as any form of gambling behaviour which leads to other problems, the latter seems to suggest that problem gamblers share a problematic personality type. This, in turn, is what eventually leads to financial and personal problems.

Despite the efforts of Addictions Services counsellors to define and treat gambling problems, a 1998 study entitled The State of Gambling in Canada: An Interprovincial Roadmap of Gambling and It’s Impact, published by the Canada West Foundation, gave the government of Newfoundland a grade of ‘D-’ for it’s gambling strategy. This was the lowest grade given to any

province or territory. The reasons cited for the low score were that the province: failed to consult the public in any way on its decision making, conducted no research, and made very little data available about its revenue performance (Azmier and Smith 1998).

Perhaps in response to this negative publicity, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador took steps toward expanding its problem gambling strategy in 1999 and 2000. The most significant change has been the addition of warning labels and posters on and around each VLT, cautioning players about the potential dangers of excessive gambling. Also, VLTs now display a phone number for a general addiction help line on the screen of each machine. The operators of the phone line do not offer actual gambling counselling, however. They merely provide a referral service whereby gamblers can be notified about nearby Addictions Services outlets.

11.1.1 THE USEFULNESS OF EXISTING SERVICES TO GAMBLERS LIVING ON THE BARREN SHORE

Though counselling services had been available in the regional centre for several years prior to the commencement of my research, I was surprised to learn that none of the Gamblers that I interviewed had pursued counselling, nor did any know of anyone living on the Shore who had. The main reason for this appears to be the lack of awareness on the part of most Gamblers that the service was available. Of the twenty-five Gamblers interviewed, only two (8%) knew that there was a counselling service in the regional centre.¹¹³ This is probably due to the fact that the service was not well promoted outside of the centre. This may be due to the fact that regional counsellors were already experiencing difficulties in coping with the size of the case loads that they already had.

¹¹³The figure would likely be higher now, due to an increase in number of Addiction Services pamphlets available, and a proposal for a new Community Health/Addictions Services outlet closer to the Barren Shore.

The lack of publicity for existing services was quite upsetting to a few of the players. After being told that the counselling service did exist, one woman replied:

When you told me that there were counsellors for gambling, you blew me away. I can't fathom that. Why wasn't I informed? I looked at the hospital bulletin boards and I asked my family doctor about it, but I couldn't find out anything. And that is supposed to be all part of the same system!

This problem was also pointed out by both of the managers of the two most popular clubs on the Shore, neither of whom had been informed about the specifics of the counselling services available.

All I heard is that there is a place where you can go to get help for gambling. I don't know where it's to. I don't think anyone around here took advantage of it. Maybe they did, I don't know. I'd say there's a lot of people who don't know anything about any of the services that are available. I think there needs to be more information about those services for people that are interested in getting help. If they asked me, I wouldn't even know what to tell them.

I have to donate one percent of my cut for rehabilitation, but I don't have a clue where my one percent gets spent. How am I supposed to know what to say to the people that have problems?

A similar publicity problem plagued the Gambler's Anonymous chapter which had operated briefly in the regional centre in 1997. While eight of the interviewees had heard that there was a Gambler's Anonymous chapter in St. John's, only two had heard about the regional chapter.¹¹⁴ This was a source of great frustration for the man who had tried to start the chapter. He was quite disdainful of the healthcare system for failing to help him with the promotion of the group's meetings.

¹¹⁴Both had become aware of this service through an advertisement that had been placed in the regional newspaper.

There's definitely a need for more services, and for more information about the services that are available. One guy spent two months trying to track me down and find out where the meetings were. Even the hospital couldn't tell him where they were held,...,and they were being held at the hospital! Also, Community Health and Addictions Services had a notice saying that the meetings were going on and where they were and my phone number, but when one guy called, they had no idea what he was talking about. I had to go back there three times to give them that information. Something really has to be done about the communication system. I even wrote the government suggesting that the times and locations for the meetings should be posted on the machines, but they never wrote me back.

When told that counselling did exist, most of the Gamblers thought that it was a good idea, but many pointed to other possible problems. A few expressed concerns that the six to eight month waiting list for counselling was too long. Several pointed out that most people who did eventually decide to seek help would probably wait until they reached a point of financial or personal crisis before they would turn to a professional counsellor. Most thought that for these persons, having to wait six months could be disastrous. One man said:

If someone had to wait eight months, they would go completely broke. If they were really hooked, they'd end up in the mental before they got to see a counsellor. Maybe they'd end up jumping over a cliff or something. It's like needing to go to the hospital. You can't wait eight months. If you need help, you need help!

Another problem which some gamblers raised was the forty-five minute to an hour long commute (each way) that players would have to make each time they wanted to see a counsellor. Several of the players did not have access to a vehicle, making the service completely inaccessible. Most of those that did have vehicles shared them with other family members. This made it difficult for them to use it for extended periods. This was thought to be particularly problematic for persons who wished to hide the fact that they were attending counselling from other family members.

A third concern was that players wishing to receive counselling could not be sure that they

could do it anonymously. Although addiction counsellors promise anonymity and confidentiality, most Gamblers thought that the identities of those persons that were seeking help would inevitably be discovered by other people on the Shore. This could cause hardships for the player and his family. Similar problems came to the fore when support groups such as Gambler's Anonymous were mentioned. Most thought that it would be impossible for the members of the group to remain anonymous. This, in turn, would deter many people from joining.

It would be a good idea to have some kind of program around here, but people would talk. These places are just too small. I bet you would get people who have never put a dollar in the machines going to see who had the gambling problems, just so that they would have something to talk about the next day.

Two of the players pointed out that the same fate had befallen the Alcoholics Anonymous chapter in the area.

I don't think many people would go to Gambler's Anonymous or counselling unless you could find a way to keep it discrete. In order to do that, you wouldn't be able to have it in this area. You just couldn't keep it anonymous. And if it wasn't anonymous, people wouldn't take advantage of it. That's what happened with AA. Too many people were talking. I know people who regularly went all the way to Grand Falls or St. John's or something, just so no one would know that they needed help.

Several people said that anonymity was essential because many players were not prepared to discuss the fact that they had a problem with their gambling publicly. While many of the Gamblers referred to themselves as addicts when talking to their gambling friends and family members, or in confidential interviews, only a few were willing to admit to other community members that their gambling had gotten out of control. This is likely because the notion of addiction continues to carry very negative connotations among many area residents, and is often equated with weakness. Because of the social stigma that surrounded the idea of gambling addiction, several players said that they would be reluctant to seek out counselling for their

problems. Instead, many of the Gamblers tended to emphasize the enjoyable aspects of gambling publically, and reserved their concerns about the consequences of their behaviour for conversations with persons they felt they could trust. Songbird proposed that the free spending tradition that characterized the group of Gamblers was a deliberate effort to draw public attention away from the negative consequences of their gambling.

I think the group of heavy gamblers evolved because we wanted to rationalize our behaviour. You know, we had to glorify it. We didn't want to be at the bottom of the social ladder, so we made it into something decadent. Something that people actually looked up to. That made it seem a lot less seamy than many other activities.

While this belief was not characteristic of the group as a whole, several of the Gamblers did express a fear that publically admitting that they were in need of help would bring about a major drop in their social status.

11.2 PLAYERS' SUGGESTIONS FOR NEW GAMBLING POLICIES

Some players felt betrayed by government officials because they had not designed a suitable infrastructure to address the needs of people with gambling problems. A few players feared that government concerns with budget cuts would make funding for gambling counselling in rural areas a low fiscal priority, and this would severely limit their chances of ever getting the help they desired. One Gambler who had been struggling to cut back on his spending expressed concern about the goals of government spending:

Is it the individual's place to say when he's had enough of these slot machines, or is it the government's place? As far as I can tell, the government is saying that the problem is not enough to warrant this or that. Obviously the public doesn't have a say. It boils down to the government's decision. I'm speaking as someone who's on the border of getting into these things really heavy, and I don't want to go there no more. I don't want to go over that line. It seems that the government is saying that it is the individuals responsibility. Maybe they are going to wait until people need to be hospitalized. I hope not, because they're trying to get people out of the hospitals now. Maybe most individuals will keep it under control, but they should have a backup plan.

Another man offered a similar assessment:

It's the same thing with everything else, like crisis centres and stuff like that. We have nothing in the way of centres for battered women or for abused kids or whatever. It's total madness out this way. We've got nothing to fall back on. I guess the gambling is just the next thing. They'll wait until people end up in institutions, and they'll pay for it then.

The apparent failure of existing system to address the needs of gamblers living on the Barren Shore led me to investigate players' suggestions for alternative programs and services. During all interviews, I made a point of asking players and bartenders about other ideas for services which they thought might be helpful. After they had replied, I told them of suggestions offered by other players, or suggestions of my own, and asked for their feedback. This section summarizes the results of this exercise.

a) Set Up a Telephone Help Line

Several players suggested that a telephone help line would solve some of the problems of the current system, because it would ensure that the identities of gamblers seeking help would remain anonymous. If players could receive counselling over the phone, some thought that they would be more apt to seek assistance. Some advised that the number should be toll free, so that all players could afford to call. A few also recommended that the number be printed visibly on the

machines, perhaps in conjunction with warning labels, so that players would see it while they were losing money. Most critics of the help line felt that it would be too impersonal. This point was recognized by most supporters of the help line, however, most of whom suggested that it would work best as a complement to face-to-face counselling, rather than as a substitute.

As mentioned, since my field research was completed, the provincial government has put signs on VLTs with the number for a province-wide referral line. The line was initially designed to deal with problems related to drug and alcohol 'addictions,' but has recently been expanded to include gambling as well. When I did a brief follow up with three of the Gamblers on March 25, 2000, a few weeks after the unveiling of the signs, none of them knew of anyone who had called the number.

b) Provide Warning Labels and Signs

In conjunction with a help line number, some players felt that warning labels should be put on the VLTs to alert potential players to the potential hazards of playing the machines. Most players felt that these signs might be useful in deterring new players from taking up playing, but would have little if any effect on the behaviour of those who were already playing heavily.

Maybe it will keep the newbies from going over the edge, but it's too little too late for us.

Others felt that warning labels would not have any effect whatsoever, and would be a waste of tax revenues.

Personally, I can't see warning labels having any major impact. It's not worth the money it would cost to change them all. That money could be used elsewhere.

A small minority of the Gamblers did, however, think that warning labels might have a positive effect on more experienced gamblers. As one player explained:

...if there were even a little notice to give people a glimmer of hope. If there were even a sign that other people are suffering like you are, I think it would make a difference. If they would put the programs into place, and make sure that everyone knew about them, it would help, because at least then we would know that somebody cared and was trying to help us.

At the onset of my research, the government of Newfoundland and Labrador had only published two pamphlets about gambling, one titled Gambling... When It's No Longer a Game! (1998a) and the other titled Gambling and Youth (1998b). Surprisingly, none of the interviewees had encountered either of these pamphlets. When I asked a regional counsellor about this, she said that they had distributed the pamphlets more widely during a special addictions awareness week, but found it difficult to circulate them into more remote areas during the rest of the year.

In March of 2000, signs warning of the potentially addictive properties of VLTs were put into all clubs in the province. The machines were also programmed to flash a message on the screens themselves, with a phone number that players could call. Also, two of the players that I spoke to in recent months said that they had noticed a couple of flyers about problem gambling at the regional hospital. Whether or not these changes will prove to be helpful remains to be seen.

c) Publicize More Information About the Odds and the Ways in Which VLTs Operate

Most players felt that printing the actual odds of winning and the expected losses for each spin would help to deter some players from spending as much as they did, though none thought that this would stop people from playing altogether. Several players thought that providing people with more information about how the machines operate would be a good idea as well.

d) Place Limits on Spending

Two players suggested that some kind of licensing system should be implemented, which

would limit the amount that a player could spend on any given day. One player said that each person that wanted to gamble on VLTs could be issued an ID card, or a password, which would have to be produced before they could play. Once the player had reached her daily limit, she would be electronically denied access to all VLTs until the next day. The player added that this system could also be used keep track of weekly, monthly, or annual expenditures as well.

Another common suggestion was to do away with all VLTs that have automatic bill acceptors. Several players suggested that, since these devices were responsible for making it easier for players to lose their money quickly, their removal might bring a return to more controlled spending. Instead, some suggested that the ALC reintroduce earlier models of VLTs, which only allowed players to insert coins.

e) Provide Re-Education for Players

Two players said that efforts should be made to instruct players about how to set budgets for themselves, and to better manage their money. While one person said that classes should be offered on gambling responsibly, the other thought that it would be better for the Atlantic Lottery Corporation or the Provincial Government to promote responsible gambling techniques by putting advertisements on television and in newspapers.

f) Make It Harder to Access VLTs

Another suggestion was to limit access to the machines. Several of the Gamblers said that they would find it much easier to control their habit if VLTs were not so widely available. Because most all of the clubs and restaurants in the area had the machines, some of the Gamblers felt as though they couldn't get away from them, even if they tried. Some said that they found themselves feeling tempted to play every time they were in a place that had the machines. As one man said:

If I'm in a place that has them, I can hear them saying 'C'mon over and give me a few bucks, I'll show you a good time.' It's so easy to be tempted.

As an alternative, a few players suggested that it would be better to centralize all VLTs in a casino, preferably in a central part of the island, so that people that wanted to gamble would have to make a special effort to go.

g) Provide Alternative Activities

Another idea was that the government should provide more leisure activities for people living in outposts, so that people wouldn't be as tempted to spend so much of their time in the club. One suggestion was to fund the development of new community centres, or sports facilities, so that new activities could develop. The relative success of one non-alcoholic pool league that operated through a small community hall on the Shore was taken by some as evidence that new social activities could be developed, which would not expose people to alcohol or VLTs. Another suggestion was that VLT revenues could be used to fund local level activities. One player speculated:

I think that there should be some way to tap into the profits made from these gambling machines and have some form of support for the people that is having the problem. And whatever is left should be put back into community activities, or jobs, or something else that is feasible for the people around. Then the people that are gambling and not winning will at least have a sense of contributing to something worthwhile, and not just helping the rich get richer.

h) Increase Media Publicity

Some people spoke of the positive effect that seeing television documentaries had on the Gamblers living on the Shore. A few suggested that more media publicity was necessary, in order to show the people who are having problems that they are not alone. One woman spoke of the positive effect that watching one particular CBC documentary had in helping her to regain control

over her gambling:

Seeing people on TV helped me to cut down. When I watched people with gambling problems on TV, it gave me a kind of connection to what was happening in my own life. Like, you know, you need to hear someone else's story to realize that you are sinking into that same hole. When you see people on TV who have lost everything, you can't help but feel compassion for them, and want to get your own life back on track. That was a turning point for me.

i) Remove VLTs Altogether

Lastly, some players felt that the only way to solve the gambling problems that people were experiencing would be to do away with VLTs altogether.

Probably the only thing that would solve the problem would be to get rid of them. I don't think it would matter if there were more services or more information. People are going to gamble just as much anyway. As long as they are in the bars, people are going to go. All that would help is to take them out.

Movements to remove VLTs are not without precedent in Canada. On the strength of anti-VLT movements in Alberta, new provincial legislation was enacted to allow for regional municipalities to hold plebiscites in order to decide whether or not to ban VLTs. Subsequently, many communities in the province, including Edmonton and Calgary, have held provincially funded referenda to decide whether or not to remove VLTs. Though both of these metropolises, as well as most smaller communities, voted narrowly against removing the machines, six smaller communities did vote to abolish VLT gambling¹¹⁵ (Hutchinson 1999). These requests have not yet been satisfied by the provincial government. After the plebiscites were held, Premier Ralph Klein announced that he would not remove the machines until the various legal challenges mounted by the local bar owners had been heard. Even if the process was found to be legal, Klein decided that

¹¹⁵Interestingly, one of the communities that voted to remove the machines was Fort McMurray, a haven for expatriate Newfoundlanders working in the oil and gas industry.

the municipalities in question would have to duplicate the results by holding their own referenda (Ibid., 1999).

Anti-VLT sentiments have been articulated in Atlantic Canada as well. In the face of rising public pressure, the governments of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island have removed VLTs from non-licensed establishments. The New Brunswick government has vowed to do the same¹¹⁶ (Perrier Mandal et al. 1999).

Overall, twelve of the twenty-five interviewees (48%) said that they would vote to remove VLTs from the Barren Shore if they were given the choice. Another eleven (44%) said that they would not support such a movement. Two (8%) were undecided. Both of these players said that they would need to know more about how many people were having serious problems before they could make up their minds.

The majority of those that did not support a move to remove the machines, spoke of VLTs as a mixed blessing. Some felt that the high social cost taken by VLTs was balanced by the fact that they provided a lot of people with much needed entertainment. One woman said:

A couple of times I have felt like doing a job on them when I seen what people were doing to themselves. But sometimes you are going to want something to do. You can't blame everything on the machines. Now that they're here, people are going to have to learn to police their own behaviour.

¹¹⁶Unlike it's three Atlantic Lottery Corporation partners, Newfoundland has never allowed VLTs in non-licensed establishments.

Another Gambler added:

I think it's too bad that people lose so much on the damn things because it is still a nice form of enjoyment. It makes a good pastime when there's not much else to do. I don't think I would be a big pusher of having them removed, even though I can see that they are causing an awful lot of harm, and people are going in the hole and whatever. It's still sometimes nice to have them there.

Three of the eleven people that were not in favour of removing VLTs said that they would have preferred that VLTs were not introduced to the Shore in the first place. Since they were already there, however, they thought it was best to leave them there. One man said:

You know, I probably would be happier if they were never introduced, but it's a job to say. Even though the better part of me wishes the dirty bastards were never invented, I have definitely grown to like them, and so have a lot of other people. I just love to see them bells there swinging, or hear the music playing. It brings people some joy every once in a while. I think now that they're here, I couldn't vote to get rid of them.

Two others said that they would favour removing VLTs from the Shore, but they were concerned about the livelihoods of club employees. It was widely agreed, by players and club owners alike, that none of the local clubs would be able to survive without the revenues provided by VLTs. In most cases, VLTs were responsible for slightly more than half of the profits of the clubs in the region. Some Gamblers did not feel that it would be fair for the club employees to suffer because players were unable to control themselves.

I would like to see them taken away, because if they were gone, the temptation would be gone. But then again, you've got to think about the people who are running the club. They're just trying to make a few bucks. It would be wrong to take that away from them, just because we put this bad habit on ourselves. That's not right. We do it to ourselves. The bar staff aren't telling us to do it. I just feels sorry for them because they are always seen as the bad guys.

Interestingly, several club owners said they would be willing to remove the machines, as long as their competitors did so as well. These perspectives tended to be representative of the more

successful club owners, however, who were less dependent on VLTs for their incomes. The less profitable club owners tended to be less supportive of removal, because they were less confident that they could survive without VLT revenues.

11.3 THE CHALLENGE FACING GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

Though most players felt that there should be more money spent on providing new services for people with gambling problems, and more efforts to publicize the initiatives that were already in place, it was generally agreed that most of the players who were in need of help would not take advantage of these services.

There is a need for services, but I don't think there's a desire for them. Not too many people are going to admit that they have a problem with it. I think it would have to get really bad before people would use services. They would have to have a very serious gambling problem.

Several Gamblers felt that the majority of the people with gambling problems would not be willing to seek help unless they had exhausted all other alternatives and had accepted that they could not keep their gambling under control by themselves.

People need to want to be helped. I don't know if any services would help. I know people who have problems but I think they would probably stay away from it. If they don't come to terms with the fact that they need help, they won't participate in any services. The people that are right into it won't want to talk about it, because they aren't in that recovery stage yet.

It appeared as though many players preferred to cope with the economic deprivation and familial strain brought about by their uncontrolled gambling than to seek professional help. A large minority of players said that they believed that government services were of very limited use and most said that they believed that the power to control gambling problems should remain with the gamblers themselves.

Certain people will gamble most everything they've got, but I don't think they need to see anyone. They come in to gamble and have their fun, but when they walk out the door, they have to take care of themselves. You either sink or you swim. I think the only way to give it up is to just decide to not go there no more. If you get into them, you better stop and think long and hard about what you're doing. You should stop and think about how hard money is to get these days. Everything in Newfoundland these days is going belly up. If you see it becoming a problem and getting out of hand, you've got to do something about it. When you get to the point where you can't pay back your debts, it's time to do some serious soul searching and give it up. It's up to you to quit. Nobody else can do it. There's absolutely nothing you can do for people. The only way to stop people from gambling is to take away all of their money.

Some players expressed open hostility toward efforts by outsiders to intervene in the control of gambling problems. The man who had endeavoured to start a Gambler's Anonymous chapter in the area said that he was eventually persuaded to give up on GA, after he received several threats from people who resented his efforts.

I had to give up on Gambler's Anonymous after a while. Seriously, I was expecting to get beaten up one night. This one night, a guy came right up into my face. He was just an inch away from me. He said 'My business is my business. Who the fuck are you shoving your face in my business?' I told him that I never told him he had to go, but that didn't hold water. He took it as a personal attack. At the time, I only had two other guys going regularly anyway, so that was enough for me to say 'Enough of this crap.'

Some players said that even though they knew that many people were experiencing serious problems because of their gambling, they didn't want the government, or anyone else, to step in. A few said that their lives had already been excessively governed by outsiders, and often these interventions had brought disastrous results. Some cited the mismanagement of the cod fishery as evidence of this point.

It also bares mention that very few outposts in Newfoundland had any form of municipal government whatsoever until the mid twentieth century (Sider 1986: 24). For most communities,

all political decisions were centrally made in St. John's until after Confederation.¹¹⁷ This seems to have fostered a sense of political impotence which is still quite apparent. While I was living on the Shore, several residents expressed frustration that they had so little control over the political decisions that governed their lives. The legacy of external control and bureaucratic mismanagement in the region appears to have fostered a general skepticism toward bureaucratic involvement in their lives generally. One heavy player explained:

I want to stop on my own. I don't want anyone trying to interfere or trying to control me. I don't want anyone to try to take them from me. Too many things have been taken away from everybody. If you take it away without giving people a fighting chance to make the conscious decision to stop, there may be a lot more danger. It's too hard to just take everything away because people will just find some other way.

Another reason for the reluctance of some Barren Shore residents to make use of government services may be that many people in the area are quite resistant to the involvement of medical health professionals in their lives. Three people, two of whom were not originally from Newfoundland, told me that they had noticed that people living on the Shore were very hesitant to go to hospitals when they suffered from illnesses or injuries. For many people, seeking the advice of a doctor was only employed as a last resort. One Gambler attributed this to the newness of the paved road, which made hospitals easily accessible to residents of the Shore for the first time. Before that, people were left to cope with most health problems on their own.

11.4 ALTERNATIVE PARADIGMS FOR UNDERSTANDING GAMBLING PROBLEMS

The remoteness of many Newfoundland and Labrador communities presents an enormous challenge for policy makers. VLTs have now proliferated into most every community that is large

¹¹⁷It bares mention that certain communities, such as Grand Bank, Burin, and Harbour Grace achieved municipality status much earlier.

enough to support a club. Some of these communities are accessible only by boats, helicopters, small planes, or long drives. Thus, many players who wished to receive treatment would have to commute several hours to get to the nearest Addictions Services outlet. The easiest way to have coped with these problems before they started may have been to have limited VLTs to areas where counselling services were already established. Even if this route had been pursued, however, it is evident that many of those who presently have easy access to counselling are deterred from taking advantage of it by a variety of other pressures.

Clearly chronic under-funding limits the number of Addictions Services outlets that can be maintained in the province, and severely restricts the capacity of counsellors to respond quickly and effectively to all persons who request counselling. In all likelihood, however, the problem of access to services cannot be solved by increased funding alone. The addition of a telephone referral line and warning labels should be a positive step toward compensating for some of the shortcomings of addiction counselling, but a number of problems remain unresolved.

Some VLT gamblers may have benefited from understanding their overspending in terms of the addiction model, and striving for complete abstinence from gambling. It appears that this perspective is of limited value to many others, however, who are unwilling or unable to extricate themselves from the gambling scene, or from their relationships with other gamblers. The practical reality of the Newfoundland setting is that very few problem gamblers will ever take advantage of the counselling services that Addiction Services provides. I believe that this should be considered in redefining the provincial gambling strategy.

It might be more valuable to explore other traditions of understanding gambling problems, which are more sympathetic toward controlled gambling, and gradual withdrawal as potential goals

of treatment. These paradigms may, in turn, present new frameworks for designing policy to cope with gambling problems in the rural Newfoundland context.

11.4.1 CONTROLLED GAMBLING vs ABSTINENCE

Many supporters of the addiction perspective discredit the possibility that problem gamblers can learn to gamble in a controlled manner (Gambler's Anonymous 1996). Instead, most have argued that complete abstinence is the only possible treatment goal. Although this perspective has come to dominate most treatment programs, there is a fledgling school of thought which has persisted in arguing that it is possible to teach people to keep their gambling under control by themselves, and that this may be a more workable goal for many problem gamblers.

Most scholars who have applied ethnographic methods to the study of gambling in field settings have refuted addiction or compulsion as a reliable explanation for heavy gambling (Herman 1967; Newman 1972; Livingston 1974; Oldman 1978; Kusyszyn 1979; Hayano 1982; Rosencrance 1985; Dickerson 1996; Walker 1996). Instead, most have argued that heavy gambling progresses along a continuum from occasional gambling to very heavy and often problematic gambling. This perspective is more capable of recognizing that gamblers have varying degrees of attachment to the game of chance itself, and to the social setting in which the game is played, the community of gamblers, and various other aspects of the gambling experience.

The 'continuum model,' as it is sometimes called, presents a completely different framework for the treatment of gambling problems. Whereas the medical model sees the problem gambler as having permanently lost control, the continuum model regards the gambler as having temporarily lost control, but having the power to again gamble in a more controlled fashion, through "...counselling, treatment, or self-awareness" (Burns 1987: 313). Unlike the medical model, it

recognizes controlled gambling as a legitimate treatment goal (Dickerson and Weeks 1979; Rankin 1982; Burns 1987; Blaszczynski and McConaghy 1989).

This perspective may be applicable in the outport Newfoundland context. Though VLT players would still have to cope with the task of redefining themselves within the context of the club, learning to understand their behaviour within a wider context may give them a sense of empowerment. Rather than interpreting occasions of heavy spending as self-defeating plunges into the depths of sickness, players may instead regard these episodes as understandable lapses on the road toward more controlled gambling. This interpretation may also allow them to maintain their relationships with other members of the group, and to continue to use the club for other purposes.

The strongest advocate for the teaching of controlled gambling as a way of treating electronic gambling machine players is Mark Dickerson. Dickerson (1983) has drafted a self-help manual for people who are experiencing gambling problems. He argues that players must decide for themselves whether abstinence or controlled gambling is right for them. Following Dickerson's lead, several studies have demonstrated that problem gamblers who have been taught about techniques to control their gambling have been quite successful in moderating their spending over time (Bannister Jr. 1977; Dickerson and Weeks 1979; Rankin 1982). Generally counselling of this nature has focussed on two dimensions of the gambling experience: the social involvements and situational contingencies which stimulate players to gamble beyond acceptable limits, and cognitive misconceptions about the nature of the gambling game which lead to overspending.

11.4.2 BEHAVIOURAL THERAPY

Behavioural Therapy typically involves teaching the gambler to recognize the environmental factors that typically drive him to gamble in an uncontrolled fashion. The gambler is then taught to

rearrange these variables in such a way that he becomes less attached to the gambling venue generally, and less likely to gamble recklessly when he does return to the venue. Gradually, the gambler learns to pursue other interests, and lessens his dependence on the feelings and relationships that had accompanied his gambling experiences.

Dickerson and Weeks (1979) found that this method was fairly successful in helping one video poker player, who had been experiencing financial and familial strain as a result of his gambling. The forty year old male subject was taught to avoid the situations which typically led to a loss of control, and to involve his wife in providing support and control over his cash flow. Eventually, the gambler was able to reach a state of controlled spending, and lessen the interpersonal tensions that had been caused by his gambling problem. Behavioural counselling has also been experimented with extensively at the John's Hopkins Centre in Maryland. The Centre has enjoyed some success in using controlled gambling techniques and group counselling to help gamblers to moderate their behaviour.

Despite these positive results, controlled gambling through behaviour modification has not been embraced as a core treatment strategy in any Canadian province. The one possible exception is the program followed by the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Use Commission. The organization has published a document entitled: Problem Gambling Self-Help Strategies, which offers fifteen suggestions to help gamblers to learn to moderate their gambling, either by themselves, or in consultations with professionals (Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission 1998). These include such tips as: handling money as little as possible, developing other ways of spending time and energy, changing habits and behaviours that lead to gambling, and keeping a diary of expenditures (For the complete list, see Appendix B). Though some of the suggested strategies,

such as taking an evening class or going out to dinner or a movie, are clearly designed with an urban setting in mind, some of the strategies may offer promise for residents of rural communities as well.

11.4.3 COGNITIVE THERAPY

A second perspective is known as Cognitive Therapy. It is based on the idea that most people with gambling problems hold inaccurate beliefs about the games upon which they are wagering. Thus, the aim of treatment is to demystify the gambler's thoughts about the odds and/or the operation of the game, and bring about a better strategy which will not lead her to lose as much money¹¹⁸ (Baucum 1985, Walker 1985). Several Canadian studies have reported that cognitive therapy has been successful in reducing occasions of overspending (Bujold et al. 1994, Sylvain et al. 1997, Ladouceur et al. 1998).

11.4.4 POSSIBLE STRATEGIES FOR GOVERNMENT POLICY

In applying these perspectives to the Newfoundland case, I believe that three complementary strategies should be considered. These are: a) increasing public awareness about the odds of winning on VLTs and the ways in which the machines operate, b) publicizing alternative strategies of understanding and managing gambling problems, and c) taking steps toward increasing the publicity and accessibility of addictions services counselling.

a) Fully Disclose All Information Relating to the Operation of VLTs

Perhaps the greatest service that the government could provide, for persons struggling to control their gambling, would be to fully disclose all information relating to the operation of VLTs.

¹¹⁸This position holds a great deal in common with the subjective probability school which dominated gambling studies in the 1950s.

It is evident that uncertainties about the ways that the machines operate have a direct relationship to players' propensities toward overspending on the machines. Working to correct public misconceptions about the operation of the machines would likely reduce excessive spending considerably.

One way to assist players would be to print notices on each VLT with information about the operating system of the machines. This should include accurate information about whether pressing the stop button has any effect on the outcome of a spin. If players knew conclusively that it had no effect, many more would let the wheels roll out on their own. This would provide them with much longer play sessions for their investment. If this led them to take less spins over the course of their session, it would likely lessen the financial burden that they would incur. Similarly, players should be informed about whether each spin is independent of all others, whether each machine is independent of all others, and whether the size of the player's bet has any effect on the outcome. It is clear that misconceptions about randomness and independence lead to recurrent overspending on the part of most heavy players. Similar findings were reported by Ladouceur et al (1998).

This strategy would also involve providing players with correct information about the odds of winning and the expected losses on each spin. Information about cumulative spins should also be released and publicized. For example, the ALC could be encouraged to release the true relationship between the total amount of money taken in by a machines and the total amount of money cashed out of the machines. The currently publicized statistics do not account for situations in which players win credits, but play them all back into the machine instead of cashing them out.

Related to this point, the ALC could be encouraged to replace the existing machines with ones that do not feature automatic bill acceptors. The strong relationship between these devices

and chronic overspending should not be overlooked. The dramatic increase in net VLT revenues in the province since these devices were installed is a testament to this point.

b) Promote Strategies for the Self-Management of Gambling Behaviour

The fact that so many people are either unwilling or unable to take advantage of counselling services suggests that a broader approach to controlling gambling problems is needed. One way in which this might be possible would be to take advantage of television or other media to promote awareness of the wide variety of social and psychological forces that lead people to overspend. It may also involve the promotion of various self-help strategies, such as those discussed earlier in this chapter, or those suggested by the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (shown in Appendix B). They should include suggestions relating to money management (i.e. leaving one's wallet at home when one goes to the gambling establishment), and about ways of upholding social relationships away from the gambling scene. A related strategy could be to subsidize local initiatives for leisure activities which would not force people to go to clubs in order to see their friends.

It is difficult to know whether a treatment paradigm which paid closer attention to these alternate strategies for modifying gambling behaviour would be more successful in reaching problem gamblers in the province. Nonetheless, I believe that these models hold an important advantage over the addiction perspective in that they view gambling problems as situational, and ultimately controllable. Instead of placing blame on a disease which is outside of the gambler's control, these models suggest that, by altering problematic behaviour patterns, and demystifying uncertainties about the nature of the game, some players might make strides toward regaining control over their gambling.

c) Increase the Publicity and Accessibility of Addictions Services Counselling

Although the existing system is far from perfect, it is clear that chronic under-funding severely limits the capacity of Addictions Services outlets in the province to function effectively in the treatment of gambling problems. The very limited awareness of the fact that a counselling service was even operating near the Shore may be an indication that more people would be inclined to speak to a counsellor if they knew that one was available. Also, the lengthy waiting list to see a counsellors demonstrates that even those who have sought help are not having their concerns responded to quickly.

One simple way in which the government could take steps toward rectifying this problem would be to make a firm commitment to make counselling more widely available. This would require both an intensification of publicity for the existing services and a continuing expansion of the number of Addictions Services outlets in the province. By doing away with waiting lists, and reducing the size of the commutes that players have to make, counselling would be made accessible to far more people in the province.

A related strategy would be to restrict VLTs to areas in which gambling counselling is already in place. One means through which this could be accomplished would be to centralize all VLTs in larger centres. If the government placed limits on the allowable distance between VLT gambling sites and the nearest counselling site, it could ensure that all persons who have easy access to VLT gambling also have easy access to counselling.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding chapters, I have tried to convey some sense of the complex web of forces that drive some Barren Shore residents to gamble heavily on VLTs. For the most part, these motivations can be summarized in terms of two broad categories: the phenomenology of playing VLTs, and the social context that surrounds the play of the machines.

12.1 THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF VLT GAMBLING

It seems clear that many players are attracted to VLTs because they provide a vehicle through which they are able to attain certain pleasurable psychological states. While the specific language used to explain these states varied somewhat from one player to another, it was apparent that most were endeavouring to represent the same families of experiences.

Many people said that they found the experience of playing VLTs exciting or exhilarating. Much of the thrill was derived from the tension of anticipating a big win. Excitement was usually present throughout the gambling session, but the degree to which it was experienced appeared to be contingent on a variety of environmental and situational factors. Also, it appeared to take some time for players to achieve this state. Occasions when their credits were depleted too quickly sometimes deprived them of the experience altogether.

Several players also spoke of a “*rush*” or “*high*” which came after they had hit the swinging bells, or received some other big win. This was commonly identified by an accelerated heart rate, perspiration, and/or euphoria. Although some players drew a distinction between the form of excitement that tended to follow a big win, and that which came from merely anticipating a win, others saw them as two sides of the same coin.

A second group of experiences were derived from intensely concentrating on the games. The majority of players made at least some efforts to figure out ways of gaining an upper hand on the machines. The most widely shared technique was to try to memorize the sequence of patterns that preceded a big win. Knowledge of this kind, it was thought, could be used to predict the arrival of a big win at some point in the future. Other common strategies included: trying to figure out how much money had been taken in by each machine, manipulating one's bet, and learning to stop the wheels at exactly the right time. Several players seemed to find these "*battles of wits*" tremendously mentally stimulating.

A number of players concentrated intensely on the games for other reasons as well. Most found that while concentrating on patterns, they were unable to think about anything else. Several players said that this deep focus was very relaxing, because it enabled them to rid their minds of stressful thoughts and allow themselves to be completely immersed in the experience of play.

It could reasonably be argued that the dramatic overlap in the sorts of feelings described by regular VLT players is not necessarily the result of a common trans-personal experience, but is, rather, a product of prolonged interactions between them. In other words, players have learned to embrace a common set of truths about the ways a person is expected to feel while playing VLTs, and have gradually learned to interpret their own experiences in accordance with these definitions. This being said, it should be noted that several researchers in Australia (Lynch 1990; Walker 1995; Dickerson 1996) and Britain (Griffiths 1990b; Fisher 1993) have also identified factors such as excitement, concentration, distraction, and/or relaxation as frequently cited motivations for playing gambling machines. These cross-cultural examples would seem to lend support to the argument that these experiences are common to a great many players, regardless of whether or not they have

been in contact with each other.

Even if there are trans-personal dimensions to the experience of playing VLTs, these dimensions have unique, culturally bound expressions. The ways in which a group of players learn to interact with the machines, the sorts of skills they put faith in, and the nature of the problems from which they are escaping may vary considerably from one social setting to another. Social and cultural variables may also have a bearing on the extent to which players find the various psychological effects of playing VLTs desirable. For example, it could be argued that many people living on the Barren Shore are culturally predisposed toward many of the psychological effects associated with playing VLTs. The majority of the players on the Shore lived with at least some degree of chronic nervousness, resulting from the economic and social upheaval that had characterized the previous decade. Under these conditions, the relaxing and distracting properties of VLTs assumed tremendous importance for certain individuals. Furthermore, many people experienced acute boredom, resulting largely from long periods of unemployment. Thus, many found the mental stimulation and feverish excitement of playing the machines powerfully enticing.

Recognizing the existence of distinct phenomenological states, that are frequently induced by playing VLTs, helps to explain the tendencies of people to overspend. While concentrating deeply on the game, some players achieved a dissociated state, which sometimes led them to lose track of time or money. This often resulted in their accidentally spending more, or staying longer, than they initially intended to. For certain players, these occasions seemed to be especially common when they were gambling as a way of distracting themselves from a stressful situation.

There is also strong evidence to suggest that this form of overspending is closely linked to the addition of automatic bill acceptors in 1997. These devices have the potential to significantly

reduce the number of stoppages in play. This, in turn, provides players with fewer opportunities to critically reflect upon the amount that they have spent, and make a decision about whether or not to continue. The substantial jump in VLT revenues since the bill acceptors were introduced suggests that these devices have had a province-wide impact.

The pursuit of excitement may also lead to overspending. Some players placed tremendous value on experiencing the rush associated with hitting the swinging bells or the bonus. On occasions where a big win was not forthcoming, these players would occasionally exceed their budgets in an effort to wait out the machine. Similarly, some players, who had already lost a substantial amount of money, had resolved to continue playing in the hopes of getting a big win and breaking even for the day. This usually led to even greater losses.

12.2 THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF VLT GAMBLING

The social dynamics that develop around the practice of VLT playing have been given less attention in the existing literature. This is not surprising, because most of what has been written about VLTs, in Canada at least, has employed either psychological (Ladouceur et al. 1998) or survey research (Gfeller 1994; Wynne 1994) methods. This preliminary ethnographic study indicates that, for many players, social, cultural and situational variables are just as important as any intrinsic attraction to the games in prompting them to gamble heavily.

I have taken the stance that the development of the group of Gamblers must be understood within its historical and cultural context. When clubs began to infiltrate the Barren Shore in the 1970s and 80s, many families were enjoying unprecedented prosperity, as a result of the booming fishing industry. This prosperity, in conjunction with the declining power of the church and the growing influence of television, helped to stimulate enormous interest in these new establishments.

For many people, this interest has continued into the present era.

Part of the reason for the popularity of clubs is that they represent one of the only secular public gathering places on the Shore. Over the last thirty years, the club has become the most popular place for celebrating birthdays, wedding receptions, good news, paydays, or just the company of good friends. For a certain subset of the population, particularly those who came of age in the seventies and eighties, clubs have completely eclipsed churches and homes as the primary socializing venues in the region. They are also one of the only public places for people to go when they want to leave their houses for a while. For this reason, some had taken to using them as a way of extricating themselves from unpleasant home situations.

It is also important to keep in mind that the clubs of rural Newfoundland emerged under conditions of widespread seasonal unemployment. On the Barren Shore, people with year-round jobs are the exceptions rather than the rule. This situation has been exacerbated by the onset of the moratorium in the early 1990s. These frequent periods of joblessness, along with the move away from subsistence production over the last fifty years, created a situation in which many people regularly experienced feelings of intense boredom. Clubs, holding a virtual monopoly on 'modern' leisure activities, were able to capitalize on this boredom. One way in which this was accomplished was by offering a continually expanding range of competitive games (darts, pool, video games, etc.) to local residents.

VLTs have quietly assumed a place within the decades-long tradition of playing games in clubs. In a mere nine years, the machines have become an important part of social life for many people on the Shore. Although the appeal of the games themselves cannot be understated, boredom also seems to have been a major factor in the development of the VLT-playing

community. Several people defined their involvement in the practice negatively, saying that they did not play because of any intrinsic quality of the machines, but rather because they had nothing else to busy themselves with.

Finally, many people had grown attached to the sense of community that had developed among the heaviest players. These feelings of togetherness were largely dependent on the willingness of these persons to spend large amounts of money on gambling, and on each other, without regard for the consequences. I have argued that this was largely a response to the widespread sense of political impotence and uncertainty that accompanied the collapse of the cod fishery. Gambling heavily on VLTs enabled these people to affirm their ties to each other and resist the political and economic forces that threatened to upset the stability of their lives. Affiliation with the group of Gamblers offered them a new sense of identity and belonging, even as previous bonds became less certain. This sense of comradery among the heaviest players would probably be less common in more urban settings, where people are likely to have fewer common experiences, and have access to a much wider range of social and recreational outlets through which to define themselves.

Social ties also exert an influence on overspending. The group of Gamblers frequently encouraged each other to bet higher, stay at the club longer, and spend their winnings freely. In addition to this individual-level pressure, the collectively respected traditions of the group, such as progressive betting, spending sprees, and sharing money, seemed designed to ensure that no one player could profit at the expense of her fellows.

12.3 VLT GAMBLING AND 'THE PUBLIC INTEREST'

Although the causes of overspending may vary considerably from one player to another,

there is evidence to suggest that the tendency for people to exceed budgetary constraints while playing gambling machines is common in many social contexts (Dickerson 1996). The incidence of economic and personal problems related to this overspending has also been well documented. For the most part, governments that decide to introduce VLT gambling as a revenue generating device anticipate that they will incur at least some cost to their healthcare system, in the form of people seeking help to control their gambling. The government of Newfoundland and Labrador appears to be a notable exception.

Although VLTs were introduced to Newfoundland in late 1990, the first counselling services for gamblers were not put into place until 1995 (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Health and Community Services 1997). Furthermore, when the government did eventually decide to develop services to combat gambling problems, it chose not to commission any research to determine the most suitable strategy for the Newfoundland population.¹¹⁹ Instead, provincial officials have appeared content to rely on data from other provinces and states in designing their approach to problem gambling.

When funding was made available, it was all delegated to Addictions Services. The organization, in turn, trained counsellors, most of whom were already employed to counsel problem alcohol and drug users, to handle problem gamblers as well. The service was then made available to interested parties through Community Health/Addictions Services outlets across the province.

Not surprisingly, Addictions Services developed its strategy with the assumption that problem gambling is an 'addiction,' and counsellors have been taught to understand gambling

¹¹⁹Most other Canadian provinces that have decided to allow VLTs have conducted at least one preliminary study, either before introducing the machines, or prior to establishing treatment programs (Perrier Mandal et al. 1999).

problems in much the same way that they understand other 'addictions.' Generally, this has meant paying particular attention to the psychological dependence that some players have on gambling games, and promoting complete abstinence from gambling as a treatment goal.

Ironically, the adoption of the addiction paradigm appears to have been counterproductive for many of the gamblers living on the Barren Shore. While only a few of these persons knew that treatment services were available, and none had actively sought out treatment, several had come to embrace the 'addiction' concept as the primary explanation for their chronic overspending. The many players who had failed in their efforts to quit only added strength to this belief. Most players described their 'addictions' in relation to their emotional attachment to the experience of playing the machines, while only a few looked at the social and situational pressures that regularly led them to overspend.

The powerful psychological attraction that many players felt to VLT games is undeniable. Nonetheless, I have come to believe that, for most of the Gamblers, the attachment that they had formed to the club, and to the other players, presented the greatest obstacles in their efforts to quit. In withdrawing from the club scene, Gamblers not only lost their primary recreational activity, but also their binding tie to many of their closest friends, and to the primary socializing venue in the area. Some also lost a major definer of their sense of identity within the community. Most players who attempted to drop out of the circle of Gamblers experienced a tremendous void, because they had nothing to fill the roles that VLT playing had come to occupy in their lives. For the most part, these players found that their resolve had been eventually overcome by the temptation to resume their old lifestyle. These recurrent setbacks led some to lose faith in their ability to control their behaviour, generally.

A recent study by the Canadian Tax Foundation found that, despite the added cost that it brings to the healthcare system and to policing, legalized gambling has a net positive impact on the economy (Canadian Tax Foundation 2000). If the situation on the Barren Shore is any indication, however, it would seem that many of those persons that are experiencing gambling-related problems are not seeking treatment. Instead, many of these people are taking the cost upon themselves, in the form of financial and interpersonal strain. This fits with William Eadington's argument that: while the economic impacts of introducing commercial gaming industries tend to be "tangible," "quantifiable" and generally "positive," the moral and social impacts linked to gambling are usually "intangible" and "difficult to measure" (1996: 244).

The fact that so few players were making use of the existing counselling services seems to be related to the fact that the designers of these services, despite the best of intentions, have not taken the intricacies of the outport setting into account. Though the regional counsellor for the Barren Shore was very busy tending to the needs of those gamblers who did seek treatment, I found that most of her clients lived in fairly close proximity to the Addictions Services office. By contrast, most people living on the Shore itself appear to have stayed away from counselling. This seems to have been due to several factors, including: inadequate publicity for the service, the long commuting distance to the counselling site, and concerns about maintaining one's anonymity. These problems are likely even worse in more remote communities, such as boat-in or fly-in communities in Labrador and southern Newfoundland, although a number of these locales do have easy access to VLTs (Burke 1999).

In addition, several Gamblers on the Barren Shore regarded addiction counselling as undesirable, because it was in conflict with the strong local value on self-reliance. Many people,

particularly men, seemed to regard frequent use of the healthcare system as a sign of weakness. The confessional dimension of counselling was particularly disturbing for many of these persons. The idea of abstinence was also difficult for some to embrace. Because the club played such a fundamental role in the social lives of most of the Gamblers, giving it up altogether didn't seem like a feasible option.

These obstacles highlight the importance of designing culturally appropriate solutions to assist people with gambling problems. In an effort to provide a blueprint of how this might be done, I have drawn upon the input of players in proposing several amendments to the current strategy. The first change would be to take steps toward ensuring that counselling is readily available to all persons who desire it. This would mean increasing publicity for services and eliminating waiting lists at counselling sites. It would also be helpful to limit VLTs to regions which have counselling services in place.

Another set of strategies would involve paying greater attention to the importance of clubs in the lives of regular VLT gamblers. The social ties that many players have formed to other regular club goers makes staying away from the gambling scene altogether an unrealistic goal. Instead, Addictions Services could promote ways in which players could learn to manage their gambling by themselves, whether through finding other activities to occupy themselves with while in the club, or by developing techniques to help them to gamble in a more controlled manner. These techniques could be discussed within counselling sessions, and promoted to the general public through flyers and media advertisements.

Related to this point, the provincial government and the ALC could assist players in their efforts to control their gambling by publically addressing some of the common misconceptions

about the ways in which VLTs work, and publicizing accurate information about the odds and expected payback (in cash, not credits) of the machines. It would also be helpful to replace the current machines with ones that do not have automatic bill acceptors. By addressing the cognitive and structural factors that frequently lead people to overspend, it might be possible to significantly reduce the incidence of gambling-related problems.

Changes of this sort would undoubtedly come at a significant cost to the provincial government. It appears that the revenues presently derived from gambling provide an ample supply of funds, however. At present, Newfoundland spends a lower percentage of its gambling revenues on services for problem gamblers than does any other province in Canada (Perrier Mandal et al.). In the 1998-1999, the province made a profit of almost \$240 million dollars from legalized gambling, more than fifteen hundred times the amount they donated to Addictions Services for the treatment of gambling problems during that year (Stuckless 1999).

The greatest barrier to the development of strategies which are sensitive to the needs of local settings may be that the very structure of Canadian gambling policies systematically excludes the input of municipalities in decision making processes. When control over gambling was transferred from the federal to the provincial level in 1985, no provisions were included to ensure that local interests were protected. Cash-strapped 'have-not' provinces, like Newfoundland, now have a systematic interest in deriving maximum possible revenues from gambling, regardless of the local level consequences. The reluctance of many outport gamblers to take advantage of counselling services suggests the expansion of commercial gambling does not significantly increase the operating costs of the provincial healthcare system.

The economic interest of the government in introducing new forms of gambling to outport

communities may have been further enhanced by the abundance of federal money that flowed into these regions after the declaration of the moratorium. Whether or not the continual expansion of VLTs to rural Newfoundland communities during the TAGS era was a deliberate effort to exploit the moratorium bounty is unclear. What is clear, however, that the province has done very little to curtail the efforts of the ALC to significantly increase its presence in rural Newfoundland during the 1990s.

The government of Newfoundland and Labrador is not alone in its unilateral governance over matters relating to gambling. All Canadian provinces, and most US states, have maintained complete control over the regulation of gambling games and the distribution of profits derived from them. In opposition to this trend, however, two noteworthy states have made efforts to integrate local interests into the political process. The state of Illinois, while maintaining complete control over decisions related to the provision of gambling, has allowed the municipalities in which the gambling takes place to have control over twenty-five percent of the profits (Delva 1995). The most promising approach, however, may be that of Iowa, in its regulation of river boat casinos. The state requires that a local referendum be held before river boat gambling can be introduced into a municipality. If the municipality votes against allowing gambling, another referendum cannot be held for two years. If it does vote to allow gambling, the issue must be resubmitted every eight years as part of the state's general election. Furthermore, additional referenda must be held each time the operator of a casino wishes to raise betting limits (Ibid.). These precautions serve to ensure that gambling operators are held accountable to the people whose lives their games impact upon.

In an age of decreasing federal transfer payments, Canadian provinces are being increasingly

forced to rely on gambling as a revenue generating device. What little funding is devoted to assisting people who develop gambling problems tends to be concentrated in regional centres, with higher population densities. This presents a serious problem for those VLT players who live in rural areas and do not have easy access to these services. In the absence of any mechanism to ensure government accountability, it is likely that people in peripheral regions such as the Barren Shore will continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of the economic and social burdens that result from inadequate funding for the management of gambling-related problems.

12.4 THE STATE OF VLT GAMBLING ON THE BARREN SHORE TODAY

Although my fieldwork term was formally completed on December 15, 1998, I have been fortunate enough to have been able make many weekend trips to the Barren Shore to visit friends and collect more data. On the weekends of March 18 and 25, 2000, I made a special effort to gather follow up information from as many of the interviewees as I could. My goal was simply to determine whether they were playing as much or more than they were during the research period, or whether they had quit or cut down on their playing since that time. In practice, I was only able to get information about twenty-one of the twenty-five Gamblers that I had originally interviewed. Of these persons, I found that fifteen (71.4%) were gambling at least as much as they had been during the research period, although eleven of them had previously expressed a desire to cut down. Three of these players (14.3%) were clearly gambling even more heavily than they had been before, while the remaining twelve (57.1%) appeared to have remained at a constant level. Two players (9.5%) had been successful in reducing their gambling considerably, and four (19.0%) had quit playing altogether.

Part of the reason that so many players were able to afford to continue gambling with the

same intensity is that the economy of the Barren Shore has been surprisingly buoyant in recent years. This was almost solely due to the remarkable success of the inshore (and to a lesser extent, offshore) snow crab fishery. Crab stocks showed tremendous rises during the moratorium period, possibly due to the reduction in the numbers of cod¹²⁰ (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, Department of Finance, Economics and Statistics Branch 1997). The conversion of existing fish-processing plants into crab-processing plants enabled many local residents to qualify for EI. Some inshore fishers and plant workers have also been able to supplement their incomes through the caplin and lump roe fisheries.

When I visited the Shore in March, 2000, several fishers were in high spirits because they had learned that snow crab quotas in Alaska and Iceland, their two principle competitors, were being reduced considerably. This promised to elevate the price that they could expect to obtain for their catches. A week later, however, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) reported that the crab stock off of many parts of Newfoundland was also showing signs of decline, and recommended a sizeable reduction in quotas across the island. This will be a major blow to the economy of the Barren Shore, which has very few other industries to fall back on. It may also force more people to reevaluate the amount of money that they can afford to spend on VLTs.

Most club employees that I have spoken to in recent months have reported a moderate reduction in the size of the group of Gamblers. Some said that this trend was countered somewhat by the rising popularity of the machines among young adults. For the most part, however, it was

¹²⁰With the shortage of cod, many areas of the province have also benefited from a rise in shrimp stocks. The inshore shrimp fishery has not been a major economic force on the Barren Shore, however, because of the small size of the shrimp found in the area. Local plants have, however, benefited somewhat through the processing of shrimp harvested by the offshore sector.

agreed that these new recruits did not spend as much and, therefore, did not make up for the loss of revenues from the core group.

Surprisingly, one of the ways in which clubs have adjusted well to the loss of VLT revenues is by reintroducing traditionally popular club games. One of the clubs changed ownership in 1999 and, after a major renovation, reintroduced cribbage tournaments and dart leagues, as well as a karioke machine. Another club invested in two new pool tables, and began holding open tournaments each weekend. Representatives of these clubs told me that they had been pleasantly surprised by the renewed interest in these activities. One said that he would much rather make money from these sorts of games than from VLTs, because they did not bring about the same negative side effects. He added that when engaged in these more “*social*” activities, players had a tendency to drink more, and he sometimes made just as much as if his patrons were playing the VLTs.¹²¹

Some of the heaviest VLT players were also pleased with these changes. Two men told me that they would rather play pool or darts of an evening, because they did not tend to spend as much money. They could, therefore, afford to stay at the club for a longer period. Although many people would still play VLTs when there were breaks in the action, involvement in these other activities offered them a way of spending less time playing the machines without having to drop out of the club scene altogether.

The renaissance in the popularity of traditional club activities suggests that VLTs may have passed their peak in popularity. Although some new players are still coming into the fold, it seems

¹²¹ For the most part, this money was drawn from a wide range of customers, whereas VLT revenues tended to come from a much smaller number of people.

reasonable to conclude that most people who are inclined to experiment with the machines have done so already. Furthermore, the fact that such a high proportion of the interviewees had made efforts to quit suggests that the group of heavy players will probably shrink in numbers over time. In all likelihood, even more people will take steps toward reducing their VLT expenditures if the regional fisheries do not show signs of recovery. This being said, the significant numbers of people who have been unable to quit or cut back, despite repeated efforts, is a cause for concern. The search for viable ways of assisting people in this predicament will be a formidable challenge for future policy initiatives.

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Appendix A

SAMPLE SURVEY QUESTIONS

- 1) What first attracted you to the machines?
- 1b) Is this still what makes you want to play? If not, what makes you want to play now?
- 2) Can you describe what it feels like to play a VLT?
- 3) Have you found that certain moods (thoughts) tend to bring on a desire to gamble?
- 4) Do you tend to come to the club with a clear idea of how long you want to spend at the VLTs?
- 4b) Do you ever find yourself gambling for longer than you initially plan to?
- 4c) Have you ever felt that your perception of time is altered in any way (feels like it passes faster or slower) while you are playing?
- 5a) Do you tend to come to the club with a clear idea of how much money you are prepared to spend?
- b) Do you ever find yourself spending more than you initially plan to? If so, why do you think this is?
- 6) Why do you usually choose to stop playing?
- 6b) Have you ever found it difficult to stop playing? If so, why do you think this is?
- 7) Do you think that the way people play the machines can influence their chances of winning?
- 7b) If so, can you tell me about any ways that you think players can improve their chances?
- 8) Have you heard any information about the odds or the expected payback on the machines?
- 9) From the time that you first started playing, would you say that you have won money, lost money, or broken even?
- 9) Do you tend to talk to other players while you are gambling?
- 10) Can you describe your idea of a successful session on the machines?
- 11) Have you ever had a desire to reduce your spending on VLTs?
- 11b) Have you ever had a desire to stop playing VLTs altogether?
- 12) Have you heard of any services for people who are trying to cut down or quit?
- 12b) Can you think of any additional services which you think would be useful?

Appendix B

PROBLEM GAMBLING SELF-HELP STRATEGIES¹²²

1. Know the warning signs of problem gambling:

- Progression of time and money spent
- Intolerance for losing (chasing losses)
- Preoccupation with gambling
- Disregard for the consequences of continued gambling

2. Handle money as little as possible.

- Dispose of instant teller/bank machine cards
- Discontinue credit cards if you have been taking cash advances or using them in other ways that support your gambling.
- Have your employer deposit your paychecks directly into your bank account.
- Ask someone you trust (family member, friend) to manage your finances.
- Consider other financial options, such as locking your money into long-term savings bonds, etc.

3. Develop other options for the way you spend your time and energy.

- Problem gamblers often gamble alone, so get involved in activities with other people (take an evening class, join a club or sports group, volunteer, participate in outings with family and friends). This can also help to relieve boredom and loneliness.
- Choose activities that will give you an outlet for excess energy (sports, jogging, brisk walks).

4. Plan and schedule your days, purposely replacing the time you spent gambling with another activity you enjoy.

5. Determine what triggers your gambling (stress, depression, loneliness, anxiety, escape from troubles) and find other ways to deal with these.

6. Change habits and behaviours that lead to gambling (driving past gambling venues you always went to, reading sports results, etc.).

¹²²Drafted by the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (1998)

7. Build a support network.

- Seek out self-help groups (Gambler's Anonymous, Gam-Anon, Gam-a-teen, etc.)
- Find a physician, psychiatrist or other health professional who can help you.
- Seek out friends, family or other relatives for support.

8. Find or associate with people who do not gamble, and meet or associate with friends in places where gambling is not available.

9. Save your gambling money for something special you enjoy (travel, hobbies) and reward yourself when you choose not to gamble (go out for dinner, or to a movie).

10. Seek out financial counselling, if needed, for budgeting skills, debt repayment plans, etc.

11. Keep a diary of all your expenditures. If you are gambling, record how much you spend and how much you win.

12. Try to reduce your financial need.

- Determine if there is something else contributing to your high level of financial need (alcohol or other drug abuse for example).

13. In addition to treatment for the gambling problem, seek treatment if there are other problems such as alcohol/other drug abuse, mental illness (depression, thoughts of suicide, mania).

- Seek counselling for marital problems, career and legal issues, and other problematic areas of your life.

14. Develop realistic expectations for change.

- It is unrealistic to expect quick changes or improvement. Lapses are likely and are not signs of failure.
- Gambling is not the best way or the only way to control your financial situation.

15. Learn more about gambling (the true odds of winning, for example) and problem gambling, through books, support group meetings, etc.

- Understand that, on games of chance, winning is due to luck and luck only -- not skill.

