

Veni, Vidi, Vici



Taking a Chance on Chance

BY LOUISE KRASNIEWICZ

IN THE POPULAR video slot machine called “Pompeii,” a chorus of male voices chants, “*Veni, Vidi, Vici*,” when gold coins consecutively appear on the first three reels. The chant is mesmerizing, encouraging continuous and rapid play so that the familiar phrase can be completed. The machine repeats “*Veni*” over and over again if only the first coin appears. “I came,” “I came,” “I came,” it will taunt the player as if it is the player’s fault that Caesar’s conquest is not complete, the machine is not conquered, and the video volcanoes are not spewing virtual coins.

Gambling's International Reach

There are about 100 countries that allow legal gambling, with the following breakdown by venues around the world: Africa 534; Asia & Middle East 490; Caribbean 1,603; Central & South America 6,823; Cruise Ships 133; Europe 140,153; North America 24,638; Oceania 8,536; for a total of 182,910 places to gamble worldwide.

About 56.2 million people patronized casinos in the US in 2006. Eleven states have a combined total of 460 commercial casinos. Twenty-eight states have a combined total of 372 tribal casinos. Some form of legal gambling exists in 48 states (not Utah and Hawaii).

Overall US gross gaming revenues totaled \$32.42 billion in 2006 (Las Vegas: \$6.689 billion; Atlantic City: \$5.208 billion; and Tribal Casinos: \$25.7 billion).

Statistics are derived from the American Gaming Association (www.americangaming.org) and the National Indian Gaming Association (www.indiangaming.org).

Themes about ancient and distant cultures are very common in the world of casino gambling. The large slot manufacturing companies have for many years developed machines that utilize Egyptian, Greek, and Roman, as well as hybrid Mesoamerican cultures in their designs. Throw in Merlin and sorcerers, Vikings, Native American spirits, Chinese warriors and dragons, African princesses, and knights and gypsies, and pretty much every major cultural tradition is represented in games that flash and spin inexact but visually appealing images of the artifacts or inhabitants of other worlds. Similarly, themed casinos such as Caesars Palace, Luxor, Excalibur, The Venetian, Treasure Island, and Sahara in Las Vegas, as well as Caesars and Trump Taj Majal in Atlantic City, and most Native American casinos across the country reiterate the connection between today's high-tech gaming and yesterday's lower-tech but equally compelling forays into gambling.

Although a more comprehensive study of slot machine and casino themes can be (and is being) undertaken, here I would like to ask simply if there is any connection between what today's visitors to casinos experience and what the ancient Romans, Greeks, Aztecs, or indigenous Americans might have encountered when they gambled in their own cultures. Are ancient societies merely the source of enticing graphics that easily replace fruits, bars, and sevens on slot machines? Or do they, even inadvertently, provide us with reminders of the long, exciting, dangerous, and contentious romance between humans and their games of chance?

Raising the Stakes

In today's world, gambling is huge and few cultures have been left untouched by the "*Veni, Vidi, Vici*" sweep of the globe. Gambling is one of the world's fastest growing industries—a veritable "cash cow"—embraced by most industrialized nations and numerous developing ones. Generating \$100 billion a year in legal revenues and much more in illicit funds, gambling is available in government-

This *kylix* (drinking cup) from Orvieto, Italy (ca. 500 BCE), depicts a young man playing the ancient Greek after-dinner drinking and gambling game, *kottabos*. UPM # 149897.





Caesars Palace, which opened in 1966 and occupies 85 acres on the Las Vegas Strip, is one of the most famous casinos using an ancient world theme.



This screen shot from the video slot machine "Pompeii" shows the gold coins in the first three columns that trigger the bonus. © 2007 Aristocrat Technologies Inc. All Rights Reserved.

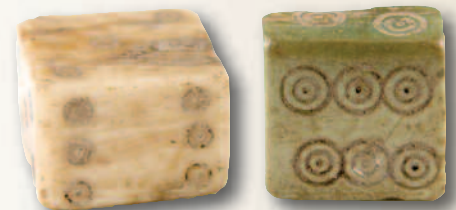
sanctioned forms at some 200,000 locations in more than 100 countries. Practiced in both its legal and illegal forms by the vast majority of people on the planet, there is every indication that it is not going away any time soon.

To attribute the spread or, more accurately, the resurgence of gambling to changes in the global economy, rampant capitalism, the weakness of the human spirit, or a contagious culture of addiction, as many popular and academic reports do, is to misunderstand the importance of gambling throughout human history. Gambling has funded education, tax cuts, social services, and community improvements, and throughout history it has provided entertainment, a transfer of goods and money, and a way to fund wars, famous universities, and even political revolutions. But to many, "I came, I saw, I conquered," is not just an ancient phrase declaring Julius Caesar's victory in battle or the compelling sound effect on a slot machine. Instead, it seems to be a warning that gambling is exploding like Pompeii's faux volcanoes, spewing billions of revenue dollars into private companies, tribal corporations, and federal, state, and local governments, while leaving destruction and waste in its path.

Don't Bet On It!

That humans everywhere have always played at games is not a new concept, and their attachment to the elements of chance in these games is also ancient. Greeks in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE played a drunken gambling game called *kottabos* during which they tossed wine dregs at an elaborate target, winning anything from sweet treats, kisses, eggs, or boots. As long as 5,000 years ago, ancient Egyptians played a board game called *senet*, which re-enacts the nightly voyage of the sun god and the soul of the deceased through the Underworld, resulting in a judgment before the gods and an elevation for the winner to divine status. The stakes in this symbolic passage through the stages of the afterlife was nothing less than the player's soul!

In the New World, Bernardino de Sahagún, a 16th century Spanish missionary, reported that wagers on the violent Aztec



Roman bone or ivory dice. UPM # 15780.

ball game consisted of “gold, golden necklaces, green stone, fine turquoise, slaves, precious capes, valuable breech cloths, cultivated fields, houses, leather leg bands, gold bracelets, arms of quetzal feathers, duck feather capes, [and] bales of cacao.”

The Aztecs also wagered equally treasured goods while playing a *pachisi*-like board-and-dice game called *patolli* that was offered by itinerant gamblers.

These examples raise interesting questions. Why do humans risk valuables—both tangible and symbolic—through gaming? Why not just trade, barter, buy and sell, create, steal, cajole, seduce, invest, or give things away without all the fuss

of playing at games? Certainly there are easier ways to get eggs, kisses, feathers, sweets, bracelets, or even souls! Why engage in these time-consuming, rule-burdened, repetitive, competitive, and sometimes risky endeavors? Why play when more logical, rational, economic, and consistent ways exist to get what you want, need, or covet? When anthropologists unpack the conceptual world of games of chance, with its burden of contradictions, irrationality, and incoherence, what will they find in this ancient human baggage?

Taking a Chance

During his years as the first Director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (1892–1899), Stewart Culin—one of the early contributors to the developing discipline of anthropology—focused much of his collecting and research on the study of games and gambling. Famous for his monumental work, *Games of the North American Indian*, published in 1907 and still widely referenced today, Culin studied Chinese gambling in downtown Philadelphia and had the Museum collect examples of gaming and gambling artifacts from around the world—many of which had been displayed at world and national expositions in the 1890s as clear examples of the universality of some human traditions.

In these early days of anthropology, many collectors and budding anthropologists viewed games as wasteful “savage” pastimes that showed how removed tribal peoples were from

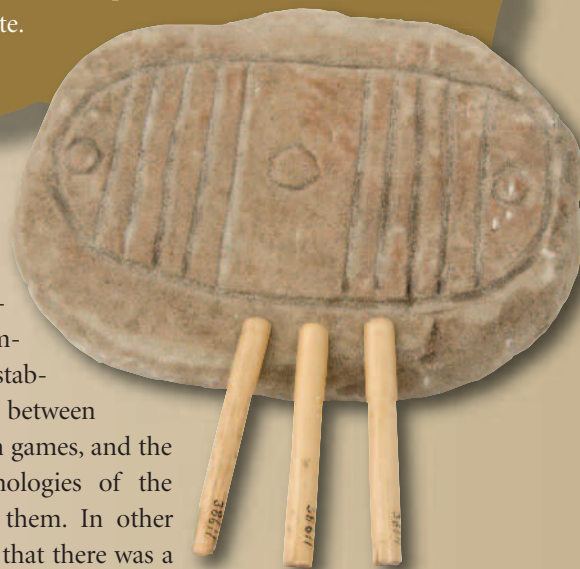


This bronze knucklebone, or *astragalus*, from Cyprus was used as a die. UPM # 54-28-202.

Life Is a Game of Chance— A Pervasive Metaphor

These phrases are used in everyday conversation, academic writing, advertising, news reports, business documents, and any other time we describe a situation that involves chance, risk, uncertainty, and luck.

I'm raising the stakes in this deal.
All bets are off, you cheater.
You can bet on it!
Don't bet on it!
No dice!
What's the deal here?
He was dealt an inside straight.
He's bluffing!
She tipped her hand that time.
I'll take my chances.
The odds are against me.
He's holding all the aces.
He's got something up his sleeve.
It's a toss-up.
If you play your cards right, you can do it.
Where is he when the chips are down?
Let's up the ante.



the advances of the newly industrialized West. Culin, however, rejected this simplistic idea and established a connection between gambling, divination games, and the world-making mythologies of the people who played them. In other words, he suggested that there was a connection between games and the “underlying foundation of mythic concepts” upon which every culture was built. Rather than being peripheral to understanding cultures, Culin

Stewart Culin collected this Hopi game stone and cane dice as well as directions for its play in 1901. UPM # 38611#3.

and some other anthropologists saw games as central for teasing out the important elements of a culture's worldview.

For instance, Culin felt that the games were born out of the human desire to make sense of a chaotic world—that characteristic human activity to understand, categorize, and control our world. He saw evidence of this in the existence of gaming and gambler gods in tribal origin myths. For example, the Navajo tell of a Great Gambler god who, like his counterpart in other cultures, is a powerful supernatural being that shakes up the world and needs to be put back into his place. In these tales a good gambler-hero must defeat the god and restore order and justice. Similarly, in the ancient Maya *Popol Vuh*, the hero twins defeat the lords of the Underworld in several bizarre games that include a ball game played with heads. Likewise, one of the great national epics of India, the *Mahabharata*, contains a dramatic account of a dice game that, like many of these stories, changes the fate of the entire world as much as that of the two players.

This connection of games, gambling, divination, and mythology to some of the fundamental concepts of human social life constitutes Culin's greatest contribution to anthropology.

The Odds Are Against Us

Play is, by definition, says French social theorist Roger Caillois, “an occasion of pure waste” that takes place in a universe that is voluntarily entered and abandoned at will. It is oddly both restrictive, with clear and precise rules, and free, offering pleasure to participants even though its outcome is uncertain. For social scientists today, play (stepping away from the everyday), games (organized play), and gambling (playing games while risking valuables) are truly serious endeavors—activities that, carefully studied, can help reveal the workings of a culture.

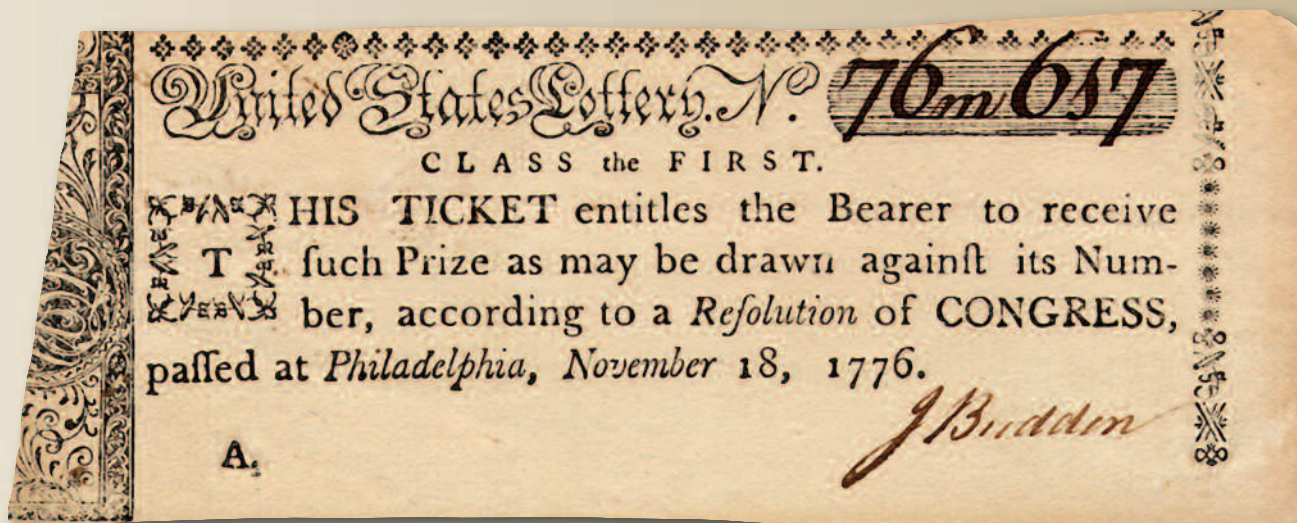
As many scholars have noted, just because play involves temporarily leaving the “real” world behind, that does not mean it has no everyday or serious implications. Play works to comment on, rehearse, highlight, or challenge aspects of the real and the mundane, making what we must or should do (under the rules of the routine and the everyday) seem suspect or less appealing. It is not just more fun than working or studying, it can also be dangerous beyond simply wasting times and resources because it inherently questions the arbitrary nature of rules in the “real” world.

Anthropologist Victor Turner considered play as a form of ritually based social dramas. As such, it is an important mode of human performance because it can recombine or redefine cultural elements into new configurations. Play involves entering a liminal, or in-between, world that uses different rules of engagement while constantly reminding us of its real-world referents. For Turner, this was just like the in-between stage of a ritual—the stage in which transformations, challenges, and reorientations take place. During many of the rituals that Turner and others have studied, participants first step out of the real world and enter a world where rules have been reversed, values turned upside down, and prohibitions become irrelevant. Only after experiencing this liminal phase do they re-enter the real world and take their revised or reinforced place within it.

This liminal period is, for Turner and many scholars of play, the most crucial moment, the set of events that trigger the essence of play. This moment is easy to identify for gamblers—seeking out a bookie to place a bet on the horses, emailing your picks to the Super Bowl office pool, or placing five dollars on the

South African divination dice.
UPM # AF42181#6.





This lottery ticket helped fund the American Revolution. Congress stated that a lottery was necessary to raise money for “the present most just and necessary War, in Defence of the Lives, Liberties and Property, of the Inhabitants of these United States.” Reproduced from the original held by the Department of Special Collections of the University Libraries of Notre Dame.

date of the birth of a colleague’s baby. It could involve entering a secret location to wager on dogs or chickens ripping each other apart or simply going to your church basement to play bingo. For commercialized and public gambling, it is the pilgrimage to a casino—a palace devoted to liminality—where time and place disappear, where noise and lights create a carnival atmosphere or recreate another culture, and where only adults can play like it is the most important thing in the world.

All Bets Are Off

Back in Stewart Culin’s Philadelphia, modern day debates about the place of gambling in everyday life are heating up. Critics of gambling see casinos as a danger to all of society and associate them with just about every social deviance and moral downfall a human can experience—addiction, drunk driving, prostitution, petty crime, embezzlement, child and spouse abuse, suicide, mortgage defaults, lower property values, public humiliation, neglect of family and hygiene, unemployment, and a waste of time, money, and human creativity. Yet of all the acknowledged bad habits in American history, gambling has gained some respectability as both a legitimate form of entertainment and a way to raise government revenues.

Although Pennsylvania has approved the establishment of slots casinos throughout the commonwealth, in Philadelphia, opponents are using the traditional “bad habits” argument to

stop developments. In public hearings, protests, petitions, ballot initiatives, lawsuits, and educational campaigns, residents who live close to proposed casino sites have defined the issue as one of containment and otherness—gambling brings strangers into their neighborhoods and exposes their community to uncontrollable activities.

In an interview posted online (www.PhillyCasinoVoices.org), one neighbor likened casinos to the local nightclubs that cause public sex, drugs, drunkenness, urinating, defecating, noise, and loud music. Most residents cite traffic and crime as their major concerns and they pity the bored and delusional seniors, poor people, and housewives who waste their time and money on these activities. Ironically, on the positive side, the fight against casinos has helped them define their communities and meet neighbors they felt they had nothing in common with before.

Holding All the Aces

While local opposition to gambling and/or casinos does not concern itself with the philosophy of games of chance, figuring out what people are doing during gaming activities is worthy of anthropological study. When humans gamble, despite what may seem like socially irresponsible activity, they are actively engaging in a crucial social experience that addresses an important human concern. When we



Residents of south Philadelphia marched against building a casino near their neighborhoods.



At a 2006 rally in downtown Philadelphia anti-casino protesters state their concerns for their neighborhood.

gamble, we are purposely confronting chance and challenging the fates, testing them, finding their weaknesses, showing our superiority to predestination, or, in failure, succumbing to the inevitability of loss in the face of bigger powers and possibilities.

Sociologist Gerda Reith, in her study of the concept of chance, calls this engagement with gambling “challenging destiny to reveal its intentions” because, even if we cannot change destiny, its intentions are weakened under our knowing attacks. According to Reith, gambling involves deliberately and

knowingly stepping up to chance and seeing how far we can push it and how well we can address the uncertainty that rules human lives.

This reiterates Victor Turner’s hypothesis that symbolic performances and ritual moments reveal how the world works in a particularly clear and straightforward way. Our forays into liminality—where the regular rules are gone and the substitute ones can be frightening and bizarre—are lessons of what can happen if we let the world fall apart.

Therefore, gambling is such an insult to so many people because, as Caillois and our Philadelphia neighbors remind us, it negates the virtues of work, patience, experience, qualifications, professionalism, application, training, and discipline—all the qualities that are supposed to make us good citizens in a stable world. When Philadelphia neighborhoods imagine themselves under attack by boozy and nasty slots players, they too are confirming that gambling reveals what can make our world come undone.

No matter when or where humans have lived, gambling intersects with a fundamental human social trait—looking to alternative futures and finding ways to make sense of risks and differences. Fate, chance, risk, luck, and destiny are all ways of thinking about and categorizing the world into those things



During one anti-casino protest, a mock slot machine with images of Donald Trump was used for political theatre.

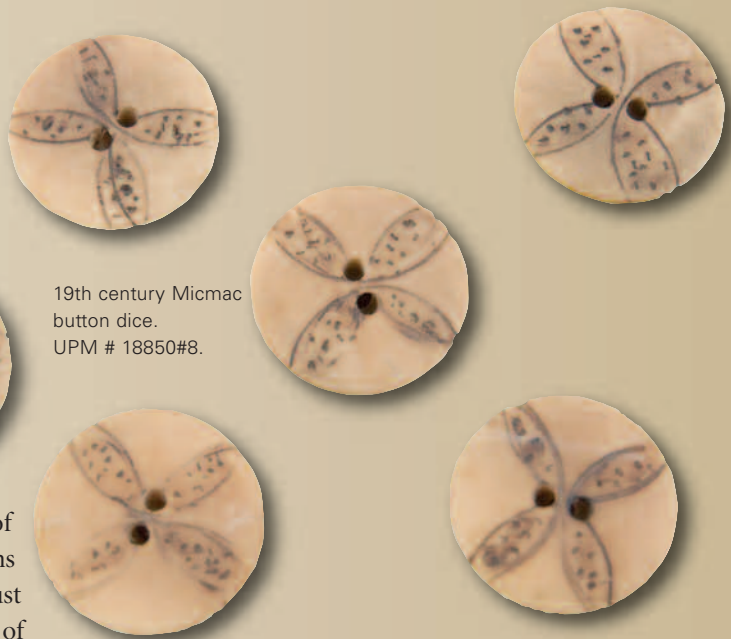
you can do and control and those things that seem beyond human control, beyond all rational, logical, magical, or religious explanations. Rather than being the scourge of ordered society, gambling may help us see what keeps us functioning by showing what limits we should place on our desires and what warnings we should heed about our weaknesses.

Interestingly, this may happen for both those gambling and those fighting to keep gambling out of their lives. Does making the ambiguities and contradictions of social life clearer mean we control them? Or does it just mean that we learn how to negotiate with them or step out of their way and recognize when to give up and cash in our chips? Anyone watching gamblers rubbing slot machine screens, whispering to dice, or swearing at cards can see how people use every human resource to bend the world of chance in their favor. Anyone watching protestors against casinos can see that they have simply chosen a different way to do this.

Humans are the only beings who can consider alternative futures, imagine options that have never taken place before, judge the odds, weigh the chances, speculate on outcomes, and decide on a course of action. This exercise in possibility, with or without the benefit of statistical probability, risk assessment, or calculated prospects, lets us know that we are still human, doing what it is that separates us from animals and from machines.

We do things, including gambling and fighting against gambling, believing in the possibility that what we are doing will help us make better sense of a confusing and contradictory world. The wonder of games of chance is that we never know for certain or for how long things will go our way. So we come back again and again and hope that next time we are luckier. Humans have always gambled and it may, indeed, be one of those near-universal human activities that exists to address a fundamental human question—what control do we have over our lives and what happens when, just for a moment and just one more time, we sit down with chance and see what cards we are dealt? 🎲

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19th century Micmac button dice.
UPM # 18850#8.

Cultural Icon (*Basic Books*, 2004). She is currently conducting field research on gambling that will be published in 2009.

For Further Reading

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Acknowledgments

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