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Zone out and your money flows away; go with the flow and your money might stay

JUSSI PALOMÄKI & MICHAEL LAAKASUO

In her 2012 book “Addiction by design: Machine gambling in Las Vegas”, cultural anthropologist Natasha Dow Schüll drew attention to a pervasive phenomenon in gambling addiction called “the Zone”: a state of dissociation in which long-term machine gamblers feel “one with the machine” and disconnected from the worries of their daily lives. To them, being in the Zone is both calming and deliberating. Playing is no longer about the thrill of the win (which it might have been in the past), but about maximizing time on machine and in the Zone – sometimes to the point of barely eating, urinating or sleeping for days, isolated from social contacts.

According to Schüll, what typically dispels the Zone is either no longer having access to money, or an overwhelming urge to go relieve oneself. At this point, when the deliberating calm of the Zone is gone, players feel sadness, guilt, shame and disappointment. Staying in the Zone steadily corrodes their finances and social life, and is at the heart of gambling addiction for many machine gambling regulars.

The Zone is comparable to a phenomenon known in positive psychology as “flow”, which has been studied extensively for many decades, most notably by psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (1990). Flow is a state of complete involvement in an activity for its own sake: The sense of self is attenuated, sense of time is distorted, and the person feels challenged and skilled. The enjoyable and engaging state of flow can be experienced in virtually any activity from surfing to playing chess. However, experiencing flow can also have adverse consequences, as noted by Csíkszentmihályi (1990, p. 62):

Enjoyable activities that produce flow have a potentially negative effect: while they are capable of improving the quality of existence by creating order in the mind, they can become addictive, at which point the self becomes captive of a certain kind of order, and is then unwilling to cope with the ambiguities of life.

This account underscores the similarities between flow and the Zone, which are further evidenced by various reports of flow experiences. For example, active surfers are often drawn to surfing because it induces flow. However, they have also reported feeling controlled by their surfing and unable to function “normally” in their social relations due to a heavy involvement with the sport (Partington, Partington, & Olivier, 2009). Moreover, skilled chess players in a flow state have been known to forget eating, drinking, or even urinating during a long and challenging match (Csíkszentmihályi, 2000). Finally, video/computer game players have died
of exhaustion and dehydration after mara-
thon gaming-sessions lasting for days (“S
Korean dies”, 2005).

Despite these negative effects, the sur-
ers, the chess and video game players alike
typically feel their flow experiences have
accomplished them something worth-
while (the extreme cases resulting in death
notwithstanding). This resonates with the
general scientific consensus that flow is
associated with increased well-being.

Given the similarities between flow and
the Zone, it is peculiar that the former is
generally viewed as a positive, life-affirm-
ing experience, whereas the latter as an
utterly negative, corrosive and ultimately
life-endangering predicament. As noted
above, both flow and the Zone can be char-
acterized by social isolation and transient
dissociation. Perhaps whether these disso-
ciative states end up being life-affirming
or detrimental depends partly on the pre-
existing mental and social conditions of
the individual experiencing them. Disso-
ciative states might be more “Zone-like” if
sought as a means to escape one’s worries
by individuals who already feel severely
stressed. Conversely, healthy people might
be predisposed to experience “flow-like”
dissociation without an urge to escape any
underlying life adversities.

However, it also seems that an impor-
tant difference between the Zone and flow
is related to money. One of the most sali-
et stressors for many people is (lack of)
money, and escaping this stress into the
Zone of machine gambling can start a vi-
cious circle: losing money in the Zone is
a constant reminder of what the person
sought to forget. We thus wonder what the
players could steadily increase their
bankrolls by playing?

This question is obviously hypotheti-
cal, but it can be indirectly assessed via
poker – a game of both skill and chance.
Depending on poker players’ skill levels,
their decisions are either profitable (win-
ning players) or detrimental (losing play-
ers) in the long run. Flow experiences
are common also among poker players
(Tendler, 2013). However, we suspect the
nature of these experiences depends on
players’ skills. Losing poker players with
highly stressful lives might play poker to
escape their stress into “Zone-like” states.
In contrast, winning players (even those
with stressful lives) might have a better
chance to enter the life-affirming flow
state: Making a long-term monetary profit
probably alleviates the aforementioned
vicious circle along with its adverse ef-
fects.

We believe a fruitful line of future re-
search involves evaluating the associa-
tions between poker players’ level of ex-
perience and skill, the nature and extent
of their flow experiences, and their general
well-being. It is plausible the frequency of
flow states is positively associated with
well-being primarily for winning play-
ers. For losing players – particularly those
with stressful lives – a dissociative flow
state might resemble the machine gam-
blers’ Zone, thus predicting reduced well-
being. These notions are probably more
evident in online than “live” poker, as
decisions are typically made in rapid suc-
cession in both online poker and machine
gambling. Our hypotheses are also in line
with recent evidence showing that level of
poker experience (and skill) is positively
associated with measures of emotion self-
regulation proficiency (Laakasuo, Palomäki, & Salmela, 2014; Palomäki, Laakasuo, & Salmela, 2013).

To conclude, we suspect that the adverse long-term effects of the machine gamblers’ Zone are more tied to its financial consequences and to the players’ underlying life conditions than to the phenomenological content of the experience itself. Therefore, it is worthwhile to explore the possibility that dissociative flow-experiences might have beneficial consequences for specific sub-groups of gamblers, such as skilled poker players.

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