



Mobile social gambling: Poker's next frontier

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César Albarrán Torres

The University of Sydney, Australia

Gerard Goggin

The University of Sydney, Australia

Abstract

In this paper, we provide a history, analysis, and theorization of the emergence of mobile social gambling—a new form of media and cultural practice that fuses “social gambling” and “social gaming,” with the affordances of mobile platforms and social networking sites. Through the use of apps in mobile devices, the consumption of risk is experiencing a shift from space-bound betting to itinerant practices that open new spaces for leisure and socialization. Focusing on a case study of the mobile app Zynga Poker, this paper attempts to identify and describe these “leakages” in the “magic circle” of gambling, which bring together social gaming and longstanding gambling cultures and practices. Our argument is that mobile gambling on smartphones and tablets extends earlier cultural practices associated with gambling activities such as poker, and much deeper into the realm of the everyday. The expansion of gambling practices into the realm of the everyday, however, poses manifold ethical, cultural, and political implications: the availability of gambling products to minors and other vulnerable populations; increased normalization of wagering as entertainment; and the merging of gambling and mobile gaming industries and markets. Digital gambling is a pressing area for future study in mobile media and communication.

Keywords

Mobile media, online gambling, social gaming, social networking

Introduction

There is a fundamental shift underway in the potential place that gambling practices in general, and certain forms of digital poker in particular, have in the everyday life of

Corresponding author:

César Albarrán Torres, Digital Cultures Program, The University of Sydney, Room S312, John Woolley Building A20, Sydney, New South Wales 2006, Australia.

Email: cesar.albarrantorres@sydney.edu.au

digital media users in smartphone- and tablet-saturated markets, particularly in the global North and urban areas elsewhere. Mobile gambling, a new form of media and cultural practice, fuses gambling, social networking (both older pre-Internet and newer online forms), and “social gaming” (the new social media form, popular especially on Facebook). Mobile gambling combines these with the affordances of mobile media devices, networks, applications, and touchscreens (Hjorth, 2010a, 2010b, 2011; Hjorth & Chan, 2009). Thus mobile social gambling is a nascent cultural phenomenon supported by the platform of personal, portable devices, such as smartphones, phablets (phone-tablet hybrids), and tablets—what Greenfield in 2006 presciently termed “everyware” (Greenfield, 2006, p. 1). Portable devices have already expanded the possibilities of other forms of media such as film, television, radio, and newspapers. As Richardson also notes, “the mobile phone and handheld game device are simultaneously—and often equally—acoustic, visual and haptic mediums” (2011, p. 419), an observation which, as we shall see, resonates in the case of mobile gambling.

Gambling via the Internet, or online gambling, is already a well-established phenomenon around the world. In online gambling, the gambling house’s servers and players’ computers can be located via an analysis of Internet protocol (IP) addresses, and where these are situated in relation to geographical place. By contrast, mobile gambling complicates the already tricky relation that online gambling has with place and jurisdiction. Due to the portability of devices and assuming reach of networks, mobile gambling could be construed to happen *everywhere* and *nowhere* at the same time. Mobile gambling, in one sense, happens in the space created by mobile handsets, applications, transmitters, and platforms. This might be via mobile Internet (with potentially identifiable Internet protocol), or otherwise via mobile handsets and services locatable in space (which is how location-based “locative” media works). Owens (2012) explains that when a government attempts to exert jurisdiction—taxation or criminalization of gambling—based on the “point of consumption” (where the “bettor” is physically located), “unforeseen consequences arise in the context of mobile gambling” (p. 356). Owen gives the example of a Californian player that gambles through her mobile first in a flight to Las Vegas, then in Oklahoma, and finally on her way to Cleveland: as those U.S. three states penalize gambling differently, she would have engaged in a “cross-country cyber-crime spree” (p. 354). Due to its relatively nomadic nature, mobile gambling poses diverse challenges to lawmakers and is a fertile ground for policy makers and theorists alike.

Some well-established online casinos such as 888 and PokerStars offer mobile apps, but they are bound by the legal framework of the jurisdictions where their servers and their users are located. As of 2014, most forms of mobile social gambling involve free-to-play wagering, especially using immensely popular app Zynga Poker and the particularities of its platform. Zynga is now available in 18 languages, and has been implemented across various platforms, including Apple iOS, Google Android, the Chinese platform Tencent, and Facebook. An expansion of mobile gambling is likely to happen soon, not least because of the 2013 developments in gambling legislation in the United States, where three states historically known as casino epicentres, Nevada, Delaware, and New Jersey, have passed bills permitting online gambling (Streitfeld, 2013).

Against the backdrop of these developments, this paper is an exploratory analysis of current cultural, market, and sociotechnical dynamics trends of digital gambling through mobile devices—focussing on smartphones and tablets. We take a cultural and media

theoretical and analytic approach, focussing on poker in particular. It is important to note, however, that other forms of mobile gambling, such as slots and sports betting, are also promising sites for academic inquiry. This study concentrates on English-speaking markets such as the United States and Australia. However, we would note the spread of mobile gambling practices in many other countries, research that will certainly complicate and contextualize our analysis.

In this paper we argue that mobile social gambling represents an important new development in media and communication (especially mobile media and communication). We contend that mobile social gambling is a significant innovation, because it taps into, and fuses with, the sociocultural shifts in gambling (as well as gaming) especially evident in poker. Here we see an interesting retracing of an earlier form of mobility—seen in the histories of riverboat gambling of the 19th century, especially in the US, as we discuss next, where poker originates. To use a conceit, mobile social gambling might be seen as a new “riverboat,” currently navigating a course between relatively “safe” spaces of social gambling and relatively “risky” spaces of legal gambling industries. Indeed, mobile social gambling calls for new sociological and cultural theoretical understanding of risk and society. The Zynga Poker app we shall shortly discuss is an emblem of the shifts in sociocultural concepts and practice of risk (Adam, Beck, & van Loon, 2000; Beck, 1992; Tulloch & Lupton, 2003) as poker’s frontiers expand and metamorphose over the span of two centuries.

As we shall suggest, this new form of mobile social gambling has implications for theories of games and gambling generally—as the cultural (and legal) breaches and leakages of the “magic circle” become systematic, pervasive, and constitutive. Our sense is that current forms of digital wagering for play money (a strict definition of gambling) blur the divide between gaming and wagering, in effect expanding the notion of gambling. As with other forms of digital entertainment, such as social networking or video streaming, consumers do not necessarily pay with currency, but with intangible goods such as time, personal information, and free labour, as we will see. Such an expansion of gambling to tap much deeply and widely into contemporary practices of gaming (especially online, social, and mobile gaming) comes as no surprise when we consider the historical fluidity and adaptability of gambling. All in all, mobile social gambling is another digital, mobile technology imbricated in the subtle yet profound changes in everyday life—with which our research needs to engage.

Poker: Prefiguring mobile culture

The expansion of gambling cultures in the 21st century is prefigured by millennia excitement, rituals, and preoccupations regarding skill and chance. We might recall individuals who carved dice in pieces of wood, stone, and ivory 10,000 years ago; people in Mesopotamia playing the Royal Game of Ur in 2600 BC; the Castilian King Alfonso X when he wrote his *Libro de los Juegos* (*The Book of Games*) in the 13th century; and the self-confessed problem gambler Fyodor Dostoyevsky (Mazur, 2009).

Despite its long lineage, even among early games theorists, gambling took sometime to emerge from the shadows as an important form of play. The great early theorist of games, the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, did see gambling as play—but gave it “short

shrift as a parasitic, materialistic and entirely negative activity: the dark side of play” (Downes, Davies, David, & Stone, 2006, p. 101). Yet, as well as being widely practised, gambling reveals deeper truths about the societies in which it is inscribed. For instance, Reith describes gambling as “the commoditization of chance” (Reith, 1999, p. 1). Harvie Ferguson points out that gambling is “simply the exchange of money itself; exchange liberated from the viscous medium of objects,” and that in this process “money gains the dignity of Being” (cited in Reith, 1999, p. 89). Lears argues that contemporary gambling games “recall ancient rituals—attempts to divine the decrees of fate, and conjure the wayward force of luck” (Lears, 2003, p. 2). In modernity, as a recent theorist has noted, social and cultural dynamics are crucial in states’ processes of governing where and how gambling happens within and between sovereign nations (Lycka, 2011).

An enormously popular mode of gambling has been poker, a wagering practice of nigh on 200 years’ standing. In poker, the purpose of the game is to win money by capturing the pot, containing the bets made by players during the round. Players place the bets hoping that they have the best hand (two cards) or that they can convince other players that they do (bluff). Players can fold (relinquish their cards), call (equal the bet), or raise the bet on each hand (McDonald, 2005). Poker involves both skill (in reading other players and preventing other players from reading you) and chance (the cards are dealt randomly). Online poker tables and mobile poker apps replicate these actions and institute new codes proper to interactive and networked entertainment.

Poker originated from the French game *poque* and thrived in the francophone milieu of New Orleans at the dawn of the 19th century and gained prominence in the 1820s (Devol, 1887; Goss & Morse, 2009; Kelly, 2006). Poker took shape in the pioneering drive of 19th century America (Hayano, 1982; Kelly, 2006; Reith, 1999). The Mississippi river provided a backdrop for a buoyant gambling culture, as the riverboats functioned as mobile “magic circles” where poker players could escape regulatory constrictions and create nuanced codes and cultural practices. Thus, poker as a popular cultural practice and entertainment industry began in the emblematic space of 19th-century mobility that the riverboat represented. The riverboat is a technology shaped by different relations and kinds of mobility than those that underpin online, mobile gambling today—nonetheless it precisely prefigures the kind of poker that is central to mobile social gambling as we see it.

These gambling cultures were not devoid of drama. Fortunes were made and lost and recently liberated slaves bet and lost their newly acquired freedom (Kelly, 2006). The stories of such legends as Maverick and Buffalo Bill (Lears, 2003; Mazur, 2009) still resonate in the public imagination through films, novels, and songs, and are now echoed in the imagery of online casinos, poker apps, and electronic gaming machines. Gamblers were the embodiment of the American Spirit, of the American Dream, the protagonists of rags-to-riches stories (Kelly, 2006). In contemporary times, poker is still perceived as a truly American enterprise, a source of “gambling nationalism” (replicated in other countries such as Australia), an expression of an alternate capitalism where, contrary to Protestant values, it is luck, and not hard work, what makes or breaks fortunes (Lears, 2003). Coinciding with the rise of online poker, poker has also become a significant spectator sport with star tournaments watched by large audiences on sports and entertainment television (Farnsworth & Austrin, 2010; cf. Hutchins & Rowe, 2012). Austrin and

Farnsworth argue that poker is “richly populated with its own celebrities and the celebration of success, both financial and reputational” (2012, p. 337). Today’s celebrity gamblers include both analogue and digital poker professionals, and quite a number of these move between both domains.

What makes poker still compelling is its deep implication in overarching cultural discourse as much as financial principles. In the opening lines to his influential *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, Beck states: “In advanced modernity the social production of *wealth* is systematically accompanied by the social production of *risks*” (Beck, 1992, p. 19). Current forms of gambling, digital and otherwise, are tantamount to an exteriorization of this *ethos*. This is evident in Fiona Nicolls’s argument that gambling venues in Australia, particularly electronic gaming machine rooms or “pokie lounges,” are figures of neoliberal governmentality as they have “embedded highly individualised constructions of freedom and responsibility across a range of social institutions” (2011, p. 234). As Cosgrave notes, the expansion of casinos is “illustrative of the transformation of economic ethics, cultural values, and socialization processes in the shift from industrial to postindustrial consumer societies” (Cosgrave, 2010, p. 116). For Clarke, casinos exemplify contemporary forms of consumption, in which perks accompany the acquisition of a good or service (Clarke, 2003, p. 11). In such accounts of risk and gambling what is evident is the way that “risk” components of gambling are muted in casino spaces (off and online) through the appeal to “free stuff.” This finessing of risk through the brandishing of the “free” is something developed in even more sophisticated and insistent ways in mobile social gambling.

In the late 1990s online poker was introduced as a new gambling enterprise aligned with the discourses and practices of the dotcom era. The first online poker site to offer real money wagering was the now defunct Planet Poker, established by Randy Blumer. The first hand was dealt on January 1, 1998. The site became commercially viable just a few months after its launch, but suffered severe problems due to poor dial-up connections, faulty software, and geographical limitations (E. Smith, 2011). In 1999 Paradise Poker challenged Planet Poker’s monopoly and thus the relentless proliferation and fierce competition of desktop-based online poker rooms began. There are currently hundreds of online poker sites on the Internet (according to one of the most comprehensive, updated lists, *PokerScout*; www.pokerscout.com/PokerSites.aspx), with some of them also offering other forms of gambling such as slots or roulette. The total revenue of online casinos is hard to assess, as some of them operate illegally and even use alternate currencies such as Bitcoins. A 2012 report by Fiedler and Wilcke (2012) revealed that two providers, PokerStars and Full Tilt Poker, dominate online poker, accounted for nearly two thirds of the market (62.69%) between them by 2010. The authors emphasize that the growth of successful online casinos depends on a network effect: “The bigger the player pool, the more players are attracted to it just by its mere size” (Fiedler & Wilcke, 2012, p. 9). The countries with the highest numbers of active poker players are the United States, Germany, France, Russia, Canada, Great Britain, Spain, Netherlands, Brazil, and Australia, for a combined pool of more than 5.5 million gamblers (Fiedler & Wilcke, 2012, p. 12). The subject of the size, significance, and potential of online gambling continues to be a much debated topic, not least because of the strong prospects for bricks-and-mortar casino and hotel developments, especially in new markets such as

China—symbolized by the rise of Macau as strong competitor to traditional locales such as Las Vegas (Fontevicchia, 2013). Online gambling continues to be a multimillion-dollar market despite regulatory controversies and crackdowns such as the Black Friday (April 15, 2011), when the biggest online poker networks in the United States were shut down.

Concluding this section of the paper, we would suggest that poker is characterized by being an especially flexible, ductile, yet enduring game. It is associated with earlier forms of portable, mobile game culture and technology, and is easily playable in the interstices of everyday life. Thus poker is well placed to renovate its role and forms, in a multiplatform, convergent digital media environment. As Farnsworth and Austrin observe, “poker typifies common patterns of interaction across traditional and new media, as well as mass and personal media forms” (2010, p. 1122). The role of the large media corporations, their key intermediaries, and platforms follows and facilitates transformations in gambling, especially poker, because they “are increasingly aware of the value of user-generated content within a mass media setting” (Lüders, 2008, p. 696).

In this paper, we do not wish to directly engage in discussion around the moral panics concerning technology and its risks (social, moral, psychological, or otherwise), on one hand, and problem gambling, on the other. There exists a large literature and substantial public discourses on these already (though critique of these remains scant and much needed). Rather, our interest here lies in tracing the parallel histories of technological development of gambling and mobile technologies, and analysing how they intersect through the bridging of social media and social gaming practices. Before we do so, it is important to return to the concepts of “play” and “gambling” themselves, to situate and appreciate how the emergence of mobile social gambling disrupts earlier notions of both of these concepts.

The “magic circle” of online poker

To understand the social and cultural shift in mobile social gambling, it is helpful to revisit the classic concept of the “magic circle” of play devised by Huizinga (Huizinga, 1938/1955). Famously, Huizinga proposed that:

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course ... The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. (Huizinga, 1938/1955, p. 10)

The applicability of the magic circle has been widely discussed and contested in relation to video games studies (Mäyrä, 2003; Woodford, 2008), digital environments (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003), and mobile gaming (Hjorth, 2011). Discussing locative games that use mobile technologies as an interface, de Souza e Silva and Sutko, for instance, suggest that: “it is no longer appropriate to talk about the magic circle, since play space merges with the ‘serious’ spaces of our ordinary life” (2009, p. 3). In relation to our topic of mobile social gambling, the issue of how to locate the “playground” or “temporary

world” raises similarly complex questions. In terms of technical and procedural factors, one might ask: is it the mobile screen accessed through the device, the app, or the network of personal relationships invoked through social networking? And what of the context in which mobile gambling interactions take place, and the embodiments concerning them? Even though video game and game studies theorists have thoroughly questioned the notion of the magic circle (Malaby, 2007), arguing that gameplay is in fact influenced by social context and factors such as cheating (Consalvo, 2009), this body of work has had little impress or influence upon academic and policy discussion around gambling. Thus gambling still tends to be framed around the gamespace versus ordinary life dichotomy, particularly when it comes to research and discussion on the many and fearing repercussions of gambling addiction.

The normalization of poker in diverse cultural spaces and configurations began in the 20th century and is closely tied with technological development (Reith, 1999; Schüll, 2012).

For quite some time, poker has been played outside card room and casino environments in both analogue and digital spaces. Kitchen table poker games and local pub poker tournaments have been the subject of academic research on the issue of gambling as play in everyday spaces (Edelhoff, 2012; Zurcher, 1970). In everyday life, gambling is now also represented and mediated by prevalent screen technologies. As mentioned, the broadcasting of professional poker tournaments in television sports channels such as ESPN and Fox Sports News has become a prominent cross-media phenomenon. The television show *World Poker Tour*, for instance, has broadcast high-stakes poker since 2002, reaching 150 countries and going into its tenth series (<http://www.worldpokertour.com/Television/Landing.aspx>).

Online gambling also became popular with video games, Internet-enabled games, and even forms of simulated gambling in virtual environments like *Second Life*, which banned wagering in 2007 as it posed thorny regulatory dilemmas (Musgrove, 2007). Wagering has a strong relationship with contemporary media ecologies, as Schüll notes: “The growing consumer familiarity with screen-based interaction that accompanied the rise of the personal computer and electronically mediated entertainment such as video games further facilitated the cultural normalization of screen gambling” (Schüll, 2012, p. 5). Thus, like most commercial enterprises in the entertainment and leisure sectors, gambling in general, and poker in particular, has been closely associated with prevalent screen cultures and platforms (in this case apps), creating new technosocial configurations, which elsewhere one of us, Albarrán Torres, dubs “gambling-machines” (Albarrán Torres, 2013)

With mobile apps, we see an extension of accessibility of poker, allowing even more frequent participation—and a potentially wider group of participants thanks to the joining of social and gambling networks. For instance, poker tournaments in digitally constructed environments, such as mobile apps, increase the tension between proximity and distance (Farman, 2012, p. 4). Through the use of social gaming apps in mobile devices, it could be argued that the consumption of risk is experiencing a shift from space-bound betting to new kinds of place-making and mobile practices that open new spaces for leisure and socialization. Theorists of new media publics have drawn attention to the emergence of “networked publics” (boyd, 2011, p. 39). Theorists of mobilities and mobile phones and media have also developed the concept of “mobile publics” (e.g., Galloway, 2010; Goggin, 2010; Sheller, 2004). Galloway has pointed out the need to

move beyond the spatial and embodied limitations inherent in some concepts of networked publics (this resonates with the space-bound distinction between online and mobile gambling). Such conceptualizations are helpful for thinking about the potential, challenges, and politics of mobile social gambling, brought together at the crossroads of a set of digital media practices (Couldry, 2012), namely social networking, social gaming, and digital gambling, around which “imagined collectives” have already been formed. Procedurally, poker is inherently social: as Hayano states, poker is a game “of imperfect, or incomplete, information” where “players must form their own conclusions about what hands other players have, what betting decisions they may make, and what their behaviour means” (Hayano, 1982, p. 5). These interpretations play out differently in networked publics and acquire a ludic component (absent, for the most part, in the competitive nature of face-to-face poker among strangers).

Zynga Poker app: The face of mobile social gambling

The leading commercial player in mobile gambling apps is the social games company Zynga. Zynga’s premier mobile social gambling app is Zynga Poker, which can also be accessed via Facebook on a laptop or desktop computer. To begin with, the user downloads and installs the app on their phone, tablet, or other mobile devices. When the app is launched, it asks the user whether they wish to log in via Facebook, or as a guest. If the user chooses Facebook, their posts to Zynga Poker can be viewed either by themselves only, via their friends, or made public (so knowledge of the Facebook privacy settings is important to avoid broadcasting every play, if this is not desired). If the user wants to buy more credit—or a small chest, for instance—a screen pops up, asking for confirmation of this “in app” purchase. As well as encouraging the user to play poker, gambling with Zynga currency, the app also features push notifications and alerts (if the user permits this). The scene is set for a game that seeks to keep the user busily playing, consuming, sharing, and purchasing—all aspects Zynga integrates in what we term the new paradigm of mobile social gambling. In doing so, Zynga seeks to build upon its successful social gaming model, which we shall now explain.

Listed on U.S. tech stock exchange NASDAQ, Zynga was founded in 2007 by Mark Pincus. Pincus had been involved with previous Internet start-ups, including Freeloader in 1995, the “first web-based consumer push company”; Support.com and social network site Tribe.net in 2003 (Zynga, 2013a). The company’s aspiration is to achieve significant scale and scope as a social games platform and provider:

at Zynga, our vision for the future is to enable one billion people across the globe to play together each month. That’s a big number, of course—but when we say our mission is to “connect the world through games,” we mean everyone: our family, our friends, our communities. (Mark Pincus, quoted in Zynga, 2013a)

This vision is predicated on an understanding of the pervasiveness of social games (Zynga, 2013a). In 2012, Zynga’s revenue was \$1.28 billion (up 12% from 2011), comprising \$1.14 billion in online game revenue and \$137 million in advertising revenue (Zynga, 2013c). In fourth quarter of 2012, Zynga claimed 56 million daily active users (up from 54 million, fourth quarter 2011), 298 million monthly active users (up from 240

million, fourth quarter 2011), and 167 million unique monthly users (up from 153 million, fourth quarter 2011; Zynga, 2013c). Despite these impressive figures, and Zynga's status as an Internet technology stock to watch, market observers have raised questions about its future profitability (Chiu, 2013).

A key issue for Zynga is its communication platform. Zynga's phenomenal success has been based on its fit with Facebook. Zynga has rode the wave of popularity of social games, especially games that articulate as seamlessly as possible with Facebook. Zynga enjoyed an exclusive deal with Facebook, offering its games nested within the Facebook.com website (Shih, 2013). The Zynga–Facebook partnership offered benefits to both, with Zynga providing an estimated 12% of Facebook's revenue in 2011 (Eha, 2013). To gain some independence from the Facebook media ecosystem, in late March 2013, Zynga relaunched its website—especially to permit users to play Zynga games directly without logging onto Facebook first. In doing so, Zynga hopes to maintain its viability as social gaming via Facebook and other social, mobile platforms, becomes an extremely crowded, competitive environment (Shih, 2013). A key issue is the future of revenue from in-game purchases, which Facebook has processed for a 30% fee (Eha, 2013). Zynga users will now use the company's own currency, but, in turn, Zynga will no longer have full access to Facebook user data (Eha, 2013).

With the pivotal relationship with Facebook in flux, Zynga has entered into real money gambling through www.zyngapluscasino.co.uk, an online casino available in the UK. Zynga Plus Casino presents the brand's set of popular characters from games like *Farmville*, and their video game look and feel, and promises to offer “non-stop opportunities to win millions in cash prizes” while connecting with “your friends and loads of new people who share your love for social online casino games” (Zynga, 2013b). In the promise of Zynga Plus Casino, there is a zone of indeterminacy that separates popular forms of social gaming and gambling, and the mobile, networked publics associated with each activity. It is in this zone that gambling becomes more like play. Again in the UK, Zynga is taking the next step, and exploring real money wagering through Facebook (Duryee, 2013).

Elsewhere other leviathans of online gambling are being attracted by the siren song of mobile social gambling. One of the world's leading companies in the manufacturing of electronic gaming machines (EGM), Aristocrat, recently acquired social casino operator *Product Madness*. As well as a new kind of cultural practice, mobile social gambling opens up potentially significant markets for the gambling industry. While mobile gambling is still in its early stages, and forecasting is notoriously inaccurate, in a 2013 white paper, Juniper Research estimates that betting through mobile devices will be a \$100 billion worldwide industry by 2017 (Juniper Research, 2012). However, as this new form is still nascent, it might be more accurate to see mobile social gambling currently working more akin to a market incubator, where players are fashioned and primed for lucrative future practices of consumption.

The cultural innovation of mobile social gambling

In early 2013, Zynga Poker was the fourth most played game on Facebook and has been a top 10 grossing game in the App Store (Zynga, 2013c). What makes social gambling through mobile devices such as smartphones different, though, is firstly the low-stakes nature of its current practices—where micropayments are made possible, indeed relatively

easy and convenient. Secondly, the smartphone, especially, extends even further the 24/7 availability that online casinos have entrenched—making poker and other gambling a resource for a much greater range of practices, places, rituals, and temporal rhythms of everyday life. Thus poker as a cultural practice is now carried out in analogue and digital spaces as diverse as luxurious casinos in Las Vegas and Macau, iPhones and Android devices, Internet cafés, kitchen tables, and television tournaments.

In the context of the new mobile social gambling, it is important to recognize that “gambling practices” now not only refer to activities in which real money changes hands but include games that simulate real wagering. We see the flourishing of cultural practices in which the boundaries between “playing” and “gambling” are purposefully as well as inadvertently transgressed. To capture the potential magnitude of the shift, we would suggest that smartphones and tablets stand to become miniaturized “cathedrals of consumption,” the phrase that Ritzer and Stillman used to sum up their analysis of casino culture and architecture in Las Vegas (Ritzer & Stillman, 2001). Mobile media devices are, in effect, portable theme parks of risk.

As devices that aspire to encourage intensive real-time gameplay, the expansion of the mobile gaming industry has allowed for a *translation* of brick-and-mortar gambling, as well as online gambling, into mobile screens characterized by ubiquity, personalization, and sociability. The player does not *go to the casino*, but *carries the casino around in their pocket*. There is a disruption of temporal regimes of gambling at stake here, recouping and capitalizing on “Lazarus time”:

The “Lazarus time” resurrected by the mobile is put to work in producing a kind of sociality that centres on informational networks rather than on physically anchored communities, and that is over-layered on, and made to interact with (relatively) fixed social interaction systems of the offline world. (Arvidsson, 2006, p. 118)

Given the growth of 3G and 4G mobile networks, the spread of wireless networks, and the continued growth of the base of mobile handsets and kindred devices, there is now the network connectivity available to support the escape of gambling from its previous technical and cultural enclosures—the magic circles of offline and online casinos and, instead, to infiltrate the everyday spaces previously foreign to this activity, such as buses, trains, cafés, parks, or movie theatres. The “absent presence” (Gergen, 2002) associated with mobile devices, theorized by Christian Licoppe (2004), allows for the *possibility* of interaction and interconnectedness to be latent at in a much great range of temporalities. This allows mobile gambling to extend earlier cultural practices associated with gambling, and much deeper into the realm of everyday. This development is propelled by the liminal space between the concepts of “playing” and “gambling” in mobile social gambling. Whereas online desktop gambling for real money requires deep user engagement, mobile social gambling allows for casual commitment, so players are “perpetually ready to resume their temporarily interrupted activities” (Richardson, 2011, p. 423).

In fact, the gambling industry has attempted to blur this conceptual divide (gambling/playing) for years, mainly concerning contentious devices that allow for everyday consumption of risk, such as slot machines. As Schüll points out in regards to slot machine gambling in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s:

The low-stakes devices fit comfortably with the redefinition of gambling as “gaming” by industry spokespeople and state officials who hoped to sway public endorsement of the activity as a form of mainstream consumer entertainment rather than a form of moral failing or predatory entrapment. (Schüll, 2012, p. 5)

Mobile social gambling adds something further to the interlocking of gaming and gambling—a controversial matter due to issues of problem gambling and addiction in countries such as Australia, where these constitute public health points of concern. A key business model for mobile social gambling apps is based on microtransactions or low-stake wagering: users do not play *for* money, but rather *with* money (virtual or otherwise). Apps aid in the normalization of digital poker practices as “gaming” and, consequently, in the intrusion of all ramifications of these cultures into the everyday. Here poker apps join other interactive games which also have ludic, social, and participatory components, forming part of the same “universe of reference” (Guattari, 1995) as *Words With Friends* (a Zynga Facebook app, which “remediates” *Scrabble*; Bolter & Grusin, 1999), *Draw This!* (drawing games), or the phenomenally successful *FarmVille*, one of Zynga’s early success stories. As Frans Mäyrä notes, “social network services have already established themselves as important tools and environments for mobile, playful communication” (Mäyrä, 2012, p. 8).

As we have noted earlier, there are sophisticated gambling apps, available through well-established online casinos like PokerStars and 888. Yet, as we suggest, such gambling apps are a mobile extension of the distinct, well-established cultural practice of wagering for real money. What makes *Zynga Poker* and other poker apps novel is that they represent the intersection between digital social gaming and gambling. In this sense, Zynga Poker and other mobile social gambling apps still fall into the realm of the “make believe.” Gambling is introduced in the cultural spaces of digital networked “play.” One plays poker as one would play popular mobile apps such as *Angry Birds*, or *Bejeweled*. The distinction between “gambling” and “playing” is therefore blurred, as gambling adopts the procedures, aesthetics and dynamics of digital forms of interactive entertainment. There is no “real” money at stake, but players invest time, personal information, and free labour that are turned into profit by “the house.” A good example of this blurring is illustrated in Zynga’s description of the participatory elements of its platform:

A leader board shows players how they compare in chip ranking to their friends and through the gift shop players can personalize and decorate their seat at the table. Players interact with other players by chatting, completing challenges and sending and receiving gifts, including poker chips. (Zynga, 2013b)

Zynga Poker’s interface showcases elements related to participatory and convergent media, such as a login through Facebook, the use of avatars, and a list of contacts known as “Poker Buddies.”

Here, even though Huizinga’s notions long preceded digital gaming, the conceptual framework he offers around “play” can be extrapolated to networked entertainment technologies. Huizinga points out that play is: “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly,” and that it is “rather a stepping out of ‘real life’ into a temporary

sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own” (Huizinga, 1938/1955, p. 8). Salen and Zimmerman have used this notion to explain how console video game playing establishes boundaries, offering the example of *Tetris*, which “provides a formalized boundary regarding play: the game is either in play or it is not” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003, p. 95). In mobile social gambling, the game space of poker is extended to the user’s social networks (Facebook, for instance)—the new kinds of blended online and offline worlds of contemporary digital media in which everyday life occurs. Indeed smartphone mobile gambling apps are enmeshed into everyday activities—an example of what Coleman (2011) has termed “X-Reality,” a space where the offline and the online are complementary and indiscernible social experiences (McCarthy & Wright, 2004). This provides another twist on the “(near) eradication of the boundaries between the inside and the outside of the ‘magic circle’ as an externality of mobility” in social gaming through smartphones (Christensen & Prax, 2012, p. 733; cf. Moore, 2011).

The enmeshing of cultural practices and technologies associated with gambling has produced other unforeseen results—which positions mobile social gambling well to reshape the older forms of institutional gambling. For instance, some industry analysts have pointed to the possibility of mobile devices being introduced in casinos as a cheaper alternative to costly electronic gaming machines (Sylvester, 2012). Thus there is real potential for mobile social gambling affordances, forms, and practices to change the procedures and processes that users expect when gambling. For the gambling industry, it is not just smartphones themselves that promise to extend markets and increase profitability. Rather the redesign of casinos and gambling environment to accommodate, if not, transform norms of gambling, by smartphones and tablets opens up new, desirable demographics. As journalist Sylvester reports: “Boutique areas set up by Acres 4.0, such as tapas bars that offer iPad slots, have resulted in the average age of players dropping five years” (Sylvester, 2012). Zynga is clearly in the vanguard of such efforts, with the branding strategy of its new online casino, clearly directed towards young, digital-savvy users.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored an important new direction in mobile ICTs, bound up with new product, service, and sociocultural innovation in gambling and gaming. We have dubbed this turn in mobile media cultures as “mobile social gambling.” Focussing on poker apps for smartphones and tablets, as we have outlined, this phenomenon is distinctive because it unfolds at the interaction of a number of developments in mobile ICTs and their sociocultural domains.

Firstly, mobile social gambling builds on the mobile phone as an intimate, portable, flexible, and extensible artefact, underpinned by a vast technological system—or really an agglomeration of assemblages (Goggin, 2006, 2010). The mobile phone is now deeply, pervasively embedded in the social and the way it is constituted, across many global societies. The mobile phone has for some years become a complex media form in its own right, as well as being articulated with various other media systems—an evolution that has been accelerated and widened with the advent of the smartphone (Goggin, 2010). We see this especially in the area of mobile gaming, the most obvious precursor form to mobile social gambling. Here mobile social gambling recursively extends the

breaching of the “magic circle,” evident in many other mobile games (Hjorth, 2010a, 2011; Hjorth & Chan, 2009).

Secondly, mobile social gambling partakes of the diffusion and innovation associated with social media on mobile platforms. As the case of Zynga social gaming graphically reveals, social media giants such as Facebook have thus far been as reliant on companies like Zynga, as the other way around. Cultures of use in social media are volatile, metastasizing or shrinking very quickly—so it will be very interesting to see how this relationship between social gaming and mobile social media develops.

Thirdly, mobile social gambling builds on the cultural and social histories of gambling. Not only do we see poker reconfigured in new mobile gambling apps such as Zynga, there are new roles for the state and regulation which deeply order and shape these emerging practices—yet are still very much unfinished. Such nascent regulation of this new kind of everyday, mobile culture practice could ultimately have a decisive influence over how extensive, popular, and relevant in the next decade mobile social gambling becomes.

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Author biographies

César Albarrán Torres is a teaching fellow and PhD candidate at the Digital Cultures Program, University of Sydney. He has worked extensively in academic and nonacademic publications as an author, editor, film critic, and translator. His current research delves into the cultures that form around the digitalization of gambling in online casinos, mobile apps, and electronic gaming machines. Other research interests include cross-platform television and film narrative, download culture, and the construction of political personae in online realms. He has written chapters in three books on Mexican media: *Reality Shows un Instante de Fama* (2003), *Internet: Columna Vertebral de la Sociedad de la Información* (2005) and *Reflexiones Sobre Cine Mexicano Contemporáneo* (2012).

Gerard Goggin is Professor of Media and Communications at the University of Sydney. He is widely published on the cultural and social dynamics of new media, with books including *Routledge Companion to Mobile Media* (2014; with Larissa Hjorth), *Mobile Technology and Place* (2012; with Rowan Wilken), *Global Mobile Media* (2011), *Internationalizing Internet Studies* (2009; with Mark McLelland), and *Cell Phone Culture* (2006).