

Edging your bets: advantage play, gambling, crime and victimisation

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Edging your bets: Advantage play, gambling, crime and victimisation

Introduction

This paper offers a virtual ethnography of an online 'advantage play' subculture. At its simplest, advantage play refers to the legal use of strategies of mathematical advantage when 'gambling' online in order to substantially reduce or remove the risk inherent in the transaction. Advantage players seek to exploit weaknesses in gambling operator's products and promotions to generate profits. These weaknesses are typically found in sports and horse betting, casino games (such as blackjack and roulette) and slot machines. Advantage players use a number of strategies including, but not limited to, matched betting¹, bonus hunting² and arbitrage³.

By way of introduction, the paper details how a 'casino culture' (Reiner, Livingstone and Allen 2001) has given rise to aleatory risk as a mainstream consumption practice. Notably, remote communications, in the form of the internet, smart phones and digital television, have been central to the dispersal of the consumption of alea through a panoply of different gambling products. The betting exchange, online casino and poker room form part of an electronic 'spectacular society' where commodities 'are now all there is to see' (Debord 1994: 42) and through which 'safe risk' (Gephart 2001) is constructed and consumed. The paper then turns to data derived from a virtual ethnography to explore the 'lived meanings' (Ferrell 1997: 3) of a subculture of advantage players. Data demonstrates how advantage players reinterpret the online gambling landscape as one of 'dangerous' rather than 'safe' risks. The anonymity, immediacy and global nature of the internet have made it an ideal tool for criminal entrepreneurs (Wall 2007; Yar 2006). For the advantage player, the significant quantities of e-cash held in online gambling sites and flowing between them and various ancillary organisations presents a digital network ripe for criminal exploitation. Theft and

fraud are perennial concerns, as a significant number of 'rogue bookmakers' engage in a wide variety of criminal activities including the theft of deposits and/or winnings, the theft of means of payment, the employment of unfair games and the use of vague terms to 'rule' against players. In this virtual world, advantage play is no longer simply an instrumental act concerned with profit accumulation to finance consumer desires. Rather, it acts as a true site of edgework where advantage players traverse narrow gorges that separate personal safety from crime and victimisation.

Gambling, risk and consumer practice

Over the last few decades, gambling in the Western world has been transformed from an activity of dubious morality to a much celebrated consumer pursuit. Industry liberalisation and deregulation, alongside the spread of consumerism, have aided the proliferation of gambling as a mainstream leisure activity (Reith 2007). This has been further buttressed by changing cultural sensibilities, which have positioned risk as an important organising principle within late modern societies.

Reiner et al. (2001) point towards a societal shift from a riskophobic to a riskophillic 'casino culture', which glorifies society's winners and shuns its losers. More recently, Martin Young (2010) has sought to unpick the dialectic relationship between the global risks of a 'risk society' (Beck 1992) and the individualised risks inherent in consumption practices, demonstrating how risk is both abhorred and feared, celebrated and embraced. Applying Caillois' (1961) distinction between competitive agonistic games and those based on chance or alea to late modern societies, Young distinguishes between the agonistic forces of gambling production and the aleatory nature of individual consumption. For Young, a contradiction lays at the heart of late modern societies, whereby individuals seek to minimise global risks but engage in mass produced aleatory risk. The consumption of chance is a

response to the unequal distribution of life chances and opportunities in late modern capitalist societies. As Jock Young (2007) recognises, a society that is inculcated with the values of meritocracy is routinely confronted with chaos in the market of rewards whereby success is distributed at random. Consequently: 'Chance is courted because hard work and personal qualifications are powerless to bring such success about.' (Caillois 1961: 114).

In essence, the risk society creates its opposite; a society that mass produces and consumes chance. Endeavour and aptitude are replaced by the fantasy of the big win, the ultimate capitalist product, the realisation of all consumer dreams (Young 2010). Such fantasies play a key role in the neo-liberal accumulation of capital and are exploited in the marketisation of gambling products by state and private bodies (McMullan and Miller 2008, 2009). It is here that 'the latent desire for pleasure within the individual is now awakened and harnessed by the state to the global industry of desire production' (Young 2010: 13).

Reith (2007: 36) suggests that the 'state sponsored fantasy of the big win' has ushered in a new consumption ethic which celebrates and promotes an 'age of chance'. In particular, the once hostile middle classes have embraced the risky consumptive practice of gambling to such an extent that it may be seen to be increasingly 'normalised' (Reith 1999). The dramatic growth in state sanctioned gambling is demonstrated by data which suggests that between 80 and 90 per cent of individuals in western societies consume gambling products (Welte et al., 2002; Abbott et al., 2004; Wardle et al., 2007, 2011). Remote communications have been central to the increased availability of gambling. Most notably, the rapid development of the internet as a public and commercial vehicle provides significant opportunity for gambling online. Since the Antigua based company InterCasino became the first internet gambling site to accept an online wager in January 1996, the number of online organisations taking bets has risen steadily year upon year (Schwartz 2006; Williams and Wood 2007). Today, there are in the region of 2,347 licensed online gambling sites, distributed amongst 661 owners

who operate from 75 different jurisdictions (Williams and Wood 2007, 2009; Casino City 2011).

The number of people gambling online is difficult to quantify, with international estimates suggesting that between 1 and 30 per cent of adults use the internet to gamble (Petry 2006; Williams and Wood 2009; Gainsbury 2010; Wardle et al., 2011). In the UK, the British Gambling Prevalence Survey has recorded the steady growth of online gambling participation rates. Successive waves of the study have seen adult participation increase from 0.2 per cent in 1999 to 6 per cent in 2007 and 10.6 per cent in 2010 (Sproston, Erens and Orford 2000; Wardle et al., 2007, 2010). So whilst prevalence of online gambling amongst the general population is low, it continues to grow. Moreover, as start-up and operating costs are significantly lower than land based equivalents, online gambling offers an extremely lucrative business venture for the entertainment and leisure industry (Clarke and Dempsey 2001). As such, it is unsurprising that the online market is the fastest growing segment of the gambling industry with recorded revenues totalling US\$21.2 billion in 2008 (H2 Gambling Capital 2009; Summerfield and Loo 2010). And despite political and legislative restrictions in certain jurisdictions, revenues are expected to grow to US\$33 billion in 2012 (Global Betting & Gaming Consultants 2011).

Available data on usage and expenditure intimates that online gambling is increasingly popular and has significant market penetration. Online gambling operations have been successful in developing sophisticated gaming software that combines live remote wagering with increased responsivity to enhance the consumer experience. This has been combined with multilingual websites, multicurrency e-cash systems and attentive and instant customer service to make internet gambling an appealing alternative to land based outfits (Griffiths and Parke 2002). Accessible, affordable and anonymous, the online gambling experience has been successfully marketed as a site of safe risks in which 'skill prevails over

luck, winning dominates losing, fantasy overshadows reality, leisure trumps work, and the potential for personal change eclipses the routines of everyday life' (McMullan and Miller 2008: 230).

Edgework as a theoretical framework

Edgework provides a suitable theoretical framework through which to examine the lived experiences of an advantage play subculture. For Lyng (1990: 857), edgework activities involve a 'clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well being or one's sense of an ordered existence'. Drawing upon Marx and Mead, Lyng explores the interplay between structural context and the phenomenology of risk taking activities, which provide a retreat from the alienating nature of late modern society. The desire to meet unfulfilled needs is central to his persuasive account of why increasing numbers of individuals engage in activities that carry a significant prospect of serious personal injury or death.

Employing verstehen-oriented research methodologies, cultural criminologists have utilised the concept of edgework to examine subcultural grouping's engagement in a variety of illicit acts from illegal motorbike racing to graffiti writing and BASE jumping (Ferrell 2001; Ferrell, Milovanovic and Lyng 2001; Librett 2008). Through an 'explosive mix of risk and skill' (Ferrell, Hayward and Young 2008: 72), extreme and often illicit voluntary risk taking is an antidote to life's 'unidentifiable forces that rob one of individual choice' (Lyng 1990: 870). Activity, skill and sensation are fundamental to the engagement in practices that challenge participant's physical and mental limits. Navigating 'the edge', between order and chaos, sanity and insanity, consciousness and unconsciousness, is both a creative and expressive act motivated by the desire for exhilarating experiences that contrast with the monotony of day-to-day life. As Ferrell (2004: 293) recognises, such sensation seeking 'recapture(s), if momentarily, the lost immediacy of the self-made human experience'.

Edgeworkers also stress the importance of methodical preparation and incremental progression in risk taking activities. Inextricably linked to the agency of the edgeworker, knowledge, control and judicious and rational action are key elements of the risk taking experience:

[P]articipants are neither dangerously 'out of control' nor possessed of some self-destructive 'death wish'. Instead, they push themselves to 'the edge', and engage there in 'edgework', in search of 'the adrenaline rush', authentic identity, and existential certainty; they lose control to take control. (Ferrell, Hayward and Young 2008: 72)

Such elements are key to distinguishing edgework from those activities that generate thrills, suspense and fear through the presence of 'chance'. Gambling is antithetical to the calculated edgeworker who seeks to manipulate and control the environment in which they perform.

Yet whilst edgework is typically linked to corporal action, it may be better understood as a psychic experience (Zwick 2005). Conceptualised in a way that does not promote one bodily sense over another, edgework can be understood phenomenologically as an experience of risk that does not necessarily provide the potential for physical damage. Thus, 'the edge' elicits feelings of omnipotence, excitement and fear that may be experienced regardless of the form of the risk taking activity undertaken. This 'disembodied' (Zwick 2005) theorisation of edgework is particularly applicable to the activities of an online advantage play subculture.

Advantage players seek to remove the risk inherent in the gambling transaction. Rationalism rather than hedonism governs the 'gamble' with the thrill and emotion of the bet reduced to a lifeless mathematical equation that lessens, removes or accounts for 'chance'. Lyng (1990: 872) has suggested that: 'many forms of gambling *do* involve highly developed

skills such as calculating odds, executing bluffs, etc. These forms of gambling can be properly classified as edgework.’ However, for the advantage player, the experiential thrill of the gamble, vital to edgework, is nullified. Instead, the individual’s ability to navigate through an online gambling environment that gives rise to crime and victimisation is where ‘the edge’ is found. Advantage players recognise that the online environment is not a site of safe risks and that the ‘expert’ systems that produce these risks are questionable. This gives rise to the potential for a unique form of edgeworking in which profit accumulation whilst avoiding criminal victimisation enables advantage players to ‘control the seemingly uncontrollable’ (Langer 1975: 323).

An ethnography of advantage play

This paper is drawn from a virtual ethnography (Hine 2000) of an online advantage play subculture. Data is derived from both the researcher's participation in advantage play and the covert participant observation of an online forum frequented by advantage players, over an eighteen month period. The forum was identified and chosen because of its position as the principal 'meeting place' for advantage players and the hub of information and experience sharing for this subcultural grouping. This provided the researcher with a suitable venue in which to explore the meanings and practices of advantage players.

Whilst there is a small body of criminological research that has utilised covert participant observation to examine virtual subcultures (Mann and Sutton 1998; Gailey 2009; Pollock 2009), to date criminological study rarely provides opportunity for the unravelling of 'lived meanings' (Ferrell 1997: 3) through the experiential immersion of the researcher in online communities. The opportunity to actively engage in advantage play enabled the researcher to become 'submerged in the situated logic and emotion' (Ferrell and Hamm 1998: 8) of the research subject. This 'methodology of attentiveness' (ibid: 10) provided the

researcher with a unique opportunity to explore the intersections between gambling, crime and victimisation online.

The researcher was introduced to advantage play through an article appearing in the Guardian newspaper's weekend money supplement (Anonymous 2010). Although the researcher had limited experience of engaging in gambling and no previous experience of online gambling or advantage play it is acknowledged that:

Neither the observer nor observed come to a scene untouched by the world.

Researchers and research participants make assumptions about what is real, possess stocks of knowledge, occupy social statuses, and pursue purposes that influence their respective views and actions in the presence of each other.

(Charmaz, 2006: 15).

Having previously worked for a well known high street bookmaker for over two years, certain preconceptions about online gambling and gambling more generally have undoubtedly developed. During this time, the researcher experienced first hand both the positive and negative effects of gambling on individuals and communities, as well as the significant profits generated by gambling organisations. Most notably, despite the proliferation of gambling in the UK, the stigma attached to the 'inveterate gambler' is all too apparent. Initially, distinguishing between gambling and advantage play proved challenging for the researcher who was extremely sceptical of claims that participants could 'account for chance'. However, as investigation progressed a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which individuals engaged with betting establishments emerged.

Participation in advantage play and participant observation was largely unstructured in nature, being built in and around the researcher's normal working and social practices. This

ad hoc approach to advantage play appears to mirror the practices of the vast majority of participants in this subculture who balance their online activities with hectic work and social lives. As a collective, advantage players are an organised network of individuals who share symbols, rituals, language and meaning. With over 2,000 registered members, the forum offers an important postmodern environment in which advantage players construct personal relationships, 'elaborate conventions of argot, appearance, aesthetics, and stylized presentation of self and thus operate as repositories of collective meaning and representation for their members' (Ferrell 1999: 403). In turn, the forum provides a rich source of data.

Over an eighteen month period, extensive field notes were developed through participation, participant observation, personal exchanges and discussions through website message boards, instant messaging services, email and short message services. This generated 1,791 individual forum 'threads' of discussion.

Underpinned by the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Charmaz 2008; Corbin and Strauss 2008), field notes were studied for patterns in attitudes, understandings and experiences of online gambling, gambling organisations, advantage play, crime and victimisation. The tenets that define grounded theory, and upon which this study is based, are:

1. Minimising preconceived ideas about the research problem and data
2. Using simultaneous data collection and analysis to inform each other
3. Remaining open to varied explanations and/or understandings of the data, and
4. Focusing data analysis to construct middle-range theories

(Charmaz 2008: 155)

Following the approach outlined by Charmaz (2008: 161), analysis synthesised 'the systematic, active scrutiny of data' with the 'successive development and checking of categories' until a point of theoretical saturation was achieved. As such, codes and categories were developed from within rather than prior to data collection, surfacing as I examined discussions and exchanges. The coded content categories that emerged from analysis included agency, anxiety, clandestineness, control, distrust, embodiment, excitement, fear, knowledge, rationality, research, risk, skill, subterfuge and suspense. Each text was analysed for evidence of the above themes and content coded accordingly. Although there is clear overlap between some of the coded categories, as investigation progressed it was evident that the themes that were uncovered underpinned four distinct characteristics essential to edgeworking activities: First, there is the recognition that the online gambling environment provides a clearly observable threat to participants; second, this environment offers the opportunity for activity, agency and authorship; third, advantage players must employ skills and knowledge to control this edgeworking environment, and; fourth, the acts that constitute advantage play allow individuals to experience extreme sensations. These characteristics structure the results section below.

The employment of a virtual ethnography raises a number of ethical considerations. In particular, informed consent and invasion of privacy, alongside potential harms to both the researcher and participants, were at the forefront of research concerns. In covert research, the principle of informed consent is transgressed as participants are unaware that they are the subjects of research inquiry. The advantage play site under investigation is, however, an openly accessible virtual public arena, which lessens the requirement for informed consent. Similarly, the site's accessibility ensures that the issue of privacy was also annulled. Participants of the advantage play site are fully aware that the website message boards and instant messaging service's archives are open access with information disseminated freely

into the public arena. Moreover, it was made clear throughout the observation period that participants suspected that their discussions and actions were being monitored by certain organisations and businesses.

The decision to engage in covert research was not taken lightly. However, advantage players by the nature of their activities are furtive individuals. In particular, they demonstrate a deep commitment not to promote themselves, their profits or their actions. Advantage players recognise that generating profits has become more difficult, as bookmakers have become aware of this increasing threat to their revenues. They also acknowledge that limiting the number of individuals engaged in such practices can result in simpler and more profitable products and promotions. Furthermore, with some individuals generating significant sums of money per month, the threat of possible taxation is given serious discussion. Unsurprisingly, this has led to efforts to restrict knowledge of their activities, which indicated that overt research in which informed consent would be secured was likely to be both an inappropriate and unproductive methodological approach to engaging with this subcultural grouping.

Careful consideration was also given to the potential harms and risks to both the researcher and researched. The internet affords a high degree of anonymity for both the researcher and research participants, but during the course of the study participants often revealed personal details and imparted information which could make them traceable. In response, every effort has been made to protect the identities of participants. All names and pseudonyms have been removed and all direct quotations have been shortened or information aggregated, in order to maintain the anonymity of the researched. Immersion in the subculture posed no risks to the researcher's safety, although it did involve a small financial risk. A modest personal investment was required as a 'float' for the initial engagement in advantage play.

Observable threats: the online gambling landscape as a site of crime

The online gambling market has been promoted by the leisure and entertainment industry as a site of safe risks where consumers can partake in a panoply of aleatory activities. However, the geographical indeterminacy of the web, coupled with the limitations of state based law, has given rise to a patchwork global regulatory network from which opportunities for criminal enterprise abound. Beyond the 2,347 licensed online gambling sites, there are a further 12,476 sites that are 'wild' or 'savage' in nature (CERT-LEXSI 2006). Wild sites are gambling organisations that operate without a licence whilst savage sites actively engage in criminal activity, including theft of payments, theft of means of payment, identity theft and money laundering (McMullan and Rege 2010). With gambling sites actively operating as vehicles for criminal enterprise or sources of crime, it is unsurprising that advantage players interpret this landscape as one full of danger and deviance. The challenges facing the advantage player (or online gambler) are neatly summarised by one respondent:

As we discussed previously, the online gambling market is primarily made up of rogue books. Beyond the high street names - and even some of their practices are questionable - there are hundreds more books that dip in and out of criminal activity. Still, as you well know, there is a lot of tax free money to be made from this game so it is well worth the risk.

The theft of customers' money is at the heart of many of the fraudulent activities undertaken by both criminal entrepreneurs and once legitimate gambling operations. Advantage players report on, and discuss, many cases in which online sites have not paid winnings, cheated players with unfair games or absconded with players' deposits. Throughout these conversations the routine nature of fraudulent activities by gambling organisations is apparent.

Typically, fraud is committed by gambling sites that take customers' money but do not pay any winnings (Griffiths 2010). Little or no gambling regulation in many jurisdictions means that it is relatively easy for criminal entrepreneurs to introduce a site, collect customer data and banking details, take bets and then close the site before paying out any winnings (McMullan and Rege 2007). Unsurprisingly, such 'deposit-only bookmakers' regularly appear on the market and eventually disappear. Enticing customers with generous sign-up bonuses, such sites operate from domain registrations that are hidden behind 'domains by proxy', which make it unclear as to who owns the site and whether or not they are licensed:

Not sure if it has been mentioned, but I would suggest caution with [bookmaker], [bookmaker] and [bookmaker] as I reckon they are deposit-only books. I can't find [out] who runs these sites, or if they are even licensed, but the domain registrations are definitely hidden behind proxies and their bonuses appear way too generous to suggest they are on the market to compete.

Deposit only bookmakers' sites are often adorned with kite-marks of 'social responsibility' that suggest the business is government licensed or has been subject to third party accreditation. The display of logos from organisations such as the Gambling Commission, the Independent Betting Adjudication Service, Gamcare and Gambling Therapy help make such sites look safe, reputable and trustworthy. Criminal enterprises also create immaculate forgeries of legitimate gambling sites by 'lifting' the general design, graphics and materials from such sources (Griffiths 2004; McMullan and Rege 2007). These state of the art webpage forgeries are one of the most common fraudulent practices that fool unsuspecting customers into depositing their money.

The fragile nature of poorly funded online gambling businesses also means a decrease in turnover can result in once legitimate companies engaging in corrupt practices.

Characterised by low profit margins and high percentage payouts, which are estimated at between 88 and 98.7 per cent of turnover (RSeconsulting 2006), online gambling sites must sustain a high turnover if they are to be successful. The difficulties in making profits from online gambling ventures is exemplified by the Maltese based sportsbook Strykke whose managing director was arrested after failing to pay over US\$70,000 to customers and continuing to operate without an appropriate licence. In discussing the closure of Strykke, the routine experience of non-payment is evident:

I didn't get paid by [bookmaker] a while back. They initially replied to emails, asked for bank details and made all the right promises. Then they stopped replying so I went the complaint route with the Lotteries and Gaming Authority [(LAG)], followed all the criteria, chased them for months, but alas nada. Bye, bye £317. This experience stopped me from going in for all those tasty reloads [(bonuses)] Strykke have recently been offering so I haven't lost as much as others.

To be fair, the LGA are getting quicker at the old licence revoking. Strykke have only been no pay (and on ponzi scheme style bonuses) for the past six months or so. As I remember, [casino] managed the best part of 18 months as a trading deposit only book before they finally closed them down. I am a ton [(£100)] down mind.

Whilst some legitimate operators engage in theft as profits turn to losses, others employ more sophisticated forms of entrapment which provide an air of legitimacy to their techniques to defraud customers. Complex terms of agreement and wager requirements prevent customers withdrawing their money and many find their winnings and deposit locked inside an account until all funds are exhausted. Moreover, rogue gambling organisations often employ vague terms to 'rule' against players, 'palp' or void (winning) bets and refuse to make payment because the player is deemed 'professional', has not entered into the 'spirit' of a promotion or has 'abused' the bonus awarded.

The online gamble environment poses numerous observable threats to those engaged in online gambling. Such threats are certainly amplified by the practices of the advantage player who actively seeks to identify and engage with a large number of gambling organisations.

Advantage play, edgework, activity and agency

As an environment awash with crime and victimisation, online gambling may be best understood as consisting of 'dangerous' rather than 'safe risks'. Nevertheless, the advantage player actively seeks to engage with a landscape that provides significant opportunity for their victimisation:

Everywhere, and I do mean everywhere, has some risk that you won't get paid.

There isn't one organisation I would one hundred per cent trust. In my opinion it's all about degrees of trust. You have to do your research it's as simple as. If the risk is the possibility of them renegeing on a promotion then I will usually give it a go. If the book is definitely rogue then you have to weigh up the likelihood of

being paid against the money you are willing to risk. Ultimately, there is always money to be made. You just need to know what you're doing.

The opportunity to produce wealth is a key characteristic of advantage play. Yet this is frequently surpassed by the desire to consume exhilarating experiences through the successful navigation of an environment dominated by 'wild' and 'savage' books. As such, the online gambling environment provides a unique opportunity for advantage players to engage in edgework.

As a kinetic prosthesis (Schnapp 1999), the computer gives the advantage player agency and authorship, enabling them to traverse the online gambling landscape. Embodied in their e-cash, the advantage player seeks out (risky) opportunities in which to invest and turn a profit:

I think the level of risks I take directly relate to the reason I use gambling sites and that there is risk in all my interactions when using online gambling sites. To highlight but a few... there is the risk when it comes to bet settlement, the risk when it comes to bonuses and their winnings, the risks of often vague terms being used to 'rule' against me and the risk of not receiving a payout. All this, together with the realities of my experiences and what I have read about, make advantage playing both challenging and exciting.

To be sure, advantage players seek to engage in practices that substantially reduce or remove the risk inherent in the gambling transaction. Profit maximisation is typically at the fore of the advantage player's mind with significant preparation and planning enabling some individuals to make significant sums of money per month. However, the financial rationality

inherent in the 'gambling' transaction is combined with an experiential thrill of engaging with risky gambling operators who must be controlled and mastered.

Controlling the edgeworking environment

The advantage player constructs a world in which their technical competence, knowledge and skill enables them to negotiate 'the edge' and avoid victimisation. A high level of preparation and research is exhibited by the advantage play community who fastidiously investigate each new betting establishment that appears on the market. Ownership and betting histories are uncovered, licensees established and records of payment explored, in order to make an assessment of the risk posed to monies that may be deposited and wagered:

Research is essential. It may be mundane, but you won't find me depositing until I know who the operators are, more importantly if and where they are licensed. Then it's a case of carefully reading and recording the terms and conditions of the bonus. It's sheer folly to deposit without doing your research. I also make sure I take a screen shot of all bets placed in case of a dispute. It's this attention to detail which will see you and your hard earned profits right in the end.

This need to carefully scrutinise and filter bookmakers, their products and promotions, is essential, as betting companies often sell customer's personal details to other rogue outfits who conduct phishing expeditions by bombarding email accounts with (what appear to be) lucrative gambling offers. The sale of personal information by bookmakers and the subsequent increased receipt of spam and phishing emails appear to be an accepted consequence of engaging with online gambling establishments:

Another issue to consider is the risk to personal data. A company may payout and so on, but if you feel the methods they use to deal with sensitive information are poor (such as you have to give your password to them on live chat or it's clear you're receiving spam and it's clear they've passed on/sold your details) then I would have to reassess the risk of playing there. Of course, if the deals are good enough and they are paying out, I can probably handle another 32 Viagra salesmen emailing me!

Subterfuge and clandestine methods are also valued skills developed by advantage players and harnessed to mitigate the risk posed by wild or savage bookmakers. Advantage players seek not to draw attention to themselves through their betting patterns i.e. by betting on out of line odds or obscure markets. If they fail to appear to be 'mug punters', limits may be placed on the amount they can bet, the amount they can bet on certain events or which markets they may wager on. Placing limits on markets, what advantage players call a 'gubbing', can have significant ramifications for the individual. The player may be unable to complete the rollover and withdraw their money successfully. Moreover, advantage players must seek to keep their account 'alive' in order to take part in future promotions and bonuses. An account on which bets are limited to pennies, or worse still account closure, can deprive the advantage player of an important revenue stream. To avoid such outcomes, advantage players often partake in what is known as 'cover play'; betting on a range of markets alongside the promotion from which profits may be derived:

If I have a largish wager requirement to complete, I tend to try to keep to betting on main markets such as the Premier League, Primera, Serie A etc. I also look to mix my bets up, some large, some small. I may also have a bit of a play around

on the slots. Obviously, with some books you want to get in and out as quickly as possible, but with others taking your time and also taking a bit of a loss on your profits can lead to future bonuses if they think you are a profitable customer.

Methodical preparation and planning, coupled with meticulous research and a carefully considered approach to engaging with specific bookmakers, is essential if 'the edge' is to be negotiated and victimisation avoided. Such skills and knowledge enable advantage players to navigate risky scenarios and engage in expressive and creative acts that generate thrills, suspense and fear.

Sensation seeking and the potential for victimisation

Edgeworking occurs when rational and judicial reasoning becomes secondary to the desire to experience risk as an end in itself. Primacy is no longer given to calculation, variance and expected value, but instead the opportunity to consume exhilarating experiences is at the forefront of the advantage player's mind. The experiential thrill of investing in books is premised on the potential for victimisation that each gambling organisation provides:

I have used sites with little or no track record, sites who previously engaged in questionable practices and sites which appear to have an unsustainable business model. The risk in doing any of these things was that I could lose whatever money I had in them, but in all cases this risk was weighed up against the potential profit. It's this that gets me buzzing - I could make good money or lose it all.

Excitement, thrill, suspense and fear are embedded in acts that constitute advantage play. Depositing personal funds is tied to fears of losing control, whilst uncertainty, anxiety and excitement govern the selection of bets (which may see the advantage player ‘bust out’⁴) and the attempted withdrawal of funds:

I've plunged in at [bookmaker] and taken the full £150 bonus for £300 deposit too! Although their terms [and conditions] appear quite predatory the bonus looks too good to pass up. I will let you know how I get on folks!

Update on [bookmaker]. Bit of a fraught week really. Deposited at [bookmaker] and received their £100 SUB [(sign up bonus)]. Both qualifying and bonus bets won leaving me with £1300 in with £6500 wager requirement to complete. It is clear from reports that this site is dying a slow death so I was thankful I bust out half way through the wagering as I couldn't have seen them paying out judging by people's recent comments. Underlayed⁵ my first bet a fair bit so I've come out with a healthy £150 profit.

The need to artificially increase risk is a key feature of edgework and evident in much of the behaviour of advantage players. The potential for, and effects of, victimisation may be artificially increased through three principal means that also act as important indicators of advantage players' knowledge, skills and experience. First, the size of float or money used for advantage play can impact greatly upon the cost of victimisation should it occur. The larger a player's float, the greater the potential profits are likely to be as more offers can be taken up and a greater number of online betting establishments can be engaged with.

Discussions indicate that most advantage players operate with floats ranging from £1,000 to

£50,000. Obviously, the larger the float the greater the potential loss could be if money is stolen by wild or savage books or from hacked accounts by criminal entrepreneurs. Second, the increased risk of operating with a large float can be aggravated or mitigated by its 'spread' across various online betting accounts. If money is concentrated in a small number of operators the potential effects of victimisation are likely to be much greater:

I have been doing this for about seven years now. I started off bonus whoring with casinos in the days before they got wise to what we were doing. With the wager requirements [at casinos] being ridiculous now it's not worth the hassle so I stick mainly to sportsbook bonuses. Fortunately I have built up a substantial float so can take a hit if an operator goes rogue. Having said that, I make it a rule not to have more than a few k [(thousand)] in any one book as I was stung quite badly a few years back when [bookmaker] ran off with my money.

Third, the risk level assigned to a particular betting establishment coupled with the amount of money deposited can also increase the level of risk posed to the advantage player. Increasing the risk and demonstrating how refined skill and knowledge can prevent victimisation is crucial to the accomplished edgeworker:

Although losing £750 wouldn't really be a problem to me I only stuck £200 in here [bookmaker] mainly because of the amateurish feel of the site. It looks like some student has knocked it up on his laptop. Anyway, I see the problem here being that I need to get in and out before the site goes tits up, but I'd advise not blindly throwing £750 in there until a few confirmed payouts come through. I myself will be trying for a payout after the weekend and I'll happily report back.

This commitment to get as close to 'the edge' without going over it appears to be a key feature of advantage players as edgeworkers. Generating profits through removing the risk inherent in gambling transactions is central to this activity. However, often the normative objective of maximising risk adjusted returns is surpassed by the desire to experience extreme emotional states through the excitement, suspense, thrill and fear generated by engaging in advantage play. As such, advantage play as edgework may be best understood as both the desire to produce wealth and the need to partake in dangerous risks that produce exhilarating experiences.

Conclusion: from the riskophobic to the riskophiliac

Lyng (1991: 1534) has acknowledged that the edgework model needs elaboration 'beyond its present empirical base' and this paper contributes to its development in two principal ways. First, criminological and sociological theory has typically explored how individuals seek to engage in edgework through real world activities, largely ignoring the opportunity for edgeworking in virtual environments. This is unsurprising, given that Lyng's model is inextricably tied to 'embodied social practices of the "lifeworld"' (2004: 359). Yet conceptualising edgework as a psychic experience lends itself particularly well to advantage play and online activities more generally. This paper has demonstrated, utilising advantage play as a trope, how the virtual world also offers opportunities for individuals to engage in edgework.

State and private bodies have harnessed public desire for engaging in aleatory risk, by developing gambling opportunities in both the real and virtual world. The spread of gambling products through remote communications is particularly pronounced, with the online arena marketed as a site of safe risks. In the virtual casino, hedonism obscures rationalism as online

gambling environments carefully construct illusions of control which suggest that gamblers can engage in edgework. Yet the stochastic nature of gambling is hidden behind a screen which aestheticises, virtualises and de-realises the gambling transaction, falsely constructing it as a site for edgework.

This research has, by way of contrast, identified how the online gambling environment has been reinterpreted, and may be better and more accurately understood as a site of dangerous risks, filled with crime and victimisation. Advantage play demonstrates activity, skill and sensation; key features of the edgework experience. Embodied in their e-cash, advantage players employ their computers as kinetic prostheses through which they traverse the online gambling landscape seeking opportunities to generate profits from gambling operators' products and promotions. However, capital accumulation increasingly becomes secondary to the experiential thrill that is generated through the potential victimisation inherent within acts of advantage play. Feelings of omnipotence, excitement and fear characterise this risk based activity, whilst methodical preparation, research, technical competence and knowledge are valuable attributes that advantage players must develop if they are to negotiate 'the edge'. So like their corporal counterparts, online activities offer opportunities for individuals to engage in edgework albeit in a disembodied form.

Second, cultural criminological research has demonstrated how edgework is applicable to numerous illicit activities from street fighting to fire setting and trespass. Consistent within this body of work is the construction of the edgeworker as the transgressor in the illicit act. Countercultural values, skill and existential experience underpin the allure of the edgeworking activities of deviant subcultures. Yet this unidirectional model of the edgeworker as the 'offender' simplifies the relationship between edgework and crime. This paper demonstrates how advantage players as potential victims experience the transcendent thrill of putting oneself in harm's way and surviving (Lyng 2005). However, whilst the

association between resistance to victimisation and edgework is, in itself, nothing new (see Rajah 2006), it offers important insights into how victimisation is something that can be actively engaged, toyed with and simultaneously enjoyed and feared. As such, advantage players invest in situations in which there is the potential for victimisation, in order to test their skills and knowledge, accumulate profit and elicit exhilarating experiences.

Increased aleatory consumption may well be a product of the chaos of market rewards, but the online gambling environment also offers opportunities to eschew this 'age of chance'. Advantage players demonstrate how manufactured and marketised (online) environments can be reconstructed and reformulated to provide individuals with the opportunities for agency and self-authorship. The interpretative, ethnographic method employed in this research has been crucial to enabling an understanding of advantage players' relationship with crime, victimisation, risk and danger, which would have remained hidden by more traditional research techniques (Caulfield and Wonders 1994). In turn, it is argued that the criminological community needs to further engage with research methodologies that can help us 'understand crime at close range' (Daly and Cheshey-Lind 1988: 517). For this to take place, researchers themselves may need to carefully balance their riskophobic and riskophiliac tendencies to develop suitable methodological approaches that provide insights into the often hidden nexus of crime, media and culture.

Notes

1. Matched betting is a technique used by individuals to generate profits from free bets and other incentives offered by bookmakers. Matched betting requires an account with a bookmaker who is offering a free bet with favourable conditions, and a betting exchange or second bookmaker, which is used to offset the loss made at the first. Typically, bookmakers require customers to place a bet using their own money before

a free bet is awarded. For this, a bet is placed at the bookmaker on a particular outcome occurring. A second bet against this particular outcome is placed at a betting exchange. This second bet is required to offset any loss if the outcome does not occur. Having now qualified for the free bet, the same process is followed using the free bet. Irrespective of outcome, a profit is generated because the bet was free.

2. Bonus hunting involves generating profits from online casino and poker room bonuses. For example, an online casino may offer a £100 bonus to customers who deposit £100. However, the bonus is only awarded once the customer has wagered their initial deposit ten times. The house edge in Blackjack is approximately 0.5 per cent. So, in completing the wager requirement (£1000 on Blackjack) and releasing the bonus, the individual would expect to lose £5. This would result in a profit of £95. Bonus hunting is also referred to as bonus bagging or bonus whoring.
3. Opportunities for arbitrage or 'arbing' arise on betting markets, due to differences in bookmaker's and betting exchange's odds on the outcome of particular events. By placing large bets on each outcome, at different betting companies, profits can be generated.
4. 'Busting out' refers to losing your back bet (on an event to happen) at a bookmaker whilst winning your lay bet (on an event not to happen) at a betting exchange. This sees player's money and any profits move from the bookmaker to the (relative) safety of the betting exchange.

5. 'Underlaying' refers to placing less money on the lay bet (on an event not to happen) than on the back bet (on an event to happen). This is typically used to skew profits so that if a bet at a bookmaker wins the profits are likely to be greater than if the bet had lost.

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