

[Time Stands Still: The Psychology of Casinos](#)  
by [Linda Rodriguez McRobbie](#) - January 23, 2009

On the face of it, it seems like a hard sell to get millions of people to part with vast amounts of their hard-earned cash with just a hint of ever getting any of it back. But since casinos are able to do it at increasing amounts every year, the question is, how?

Well, a lot of it comes down to design – casinos are designed to put visitors in a trance-like state where the bright lights, lack of natural daylight and absence of clocks keep them lulled into continually pulling out their wallets. There's a lot that goes into insulating gamblers from consciousness: Music, for example, is purposefully reminiscent of supermarket Muzak, made up of mind-numbing top-40 pop and played on a continuous loop. Free drinks – alcoholic or not – and free snacks are another way to keep gamblers happy, contented, and ponying up the cash. Loyalty programs for frequent gamblers include free stays in hotels, free cruises, even hundreds of dollars staked by the casino to the gambler, keeping that gambler coming back time after time. But casinos have a few more tricks up their sleeves, ones that most people might not even know about.

### **The Thrill of Almost Winning**

Close, they say, only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades. But what about in casinos? According to some reports, near-misses are frequently programmed into slot machines, egging the gambler on and encouraging a sense of control in what is an essentially uncontrollable circumstance.

“A near-miss causes a gambler to over-estimate their chances of winning,” Dr. Luke Clark, a Cambridge University psychologist told the BBC newsmagazine in a 2006 article on casino psychology. “If their horse finishes second, or in a casino they watch two cherries come up on a slot machine and then see the third almost click into place, they'll keep playing. A problem gambler will keep playing for a third as long again.”

### **Familiarity Breeds Revenue**

Familiarity may breed contempt, but it also, it seems, breeds slot machine revenue. Slot machines, or “fruit machines” as they're so quaintly called in the UK, rely on familiar faces, names, places, television shows and games to lure in gamblers. For example, popular slot machines at the Hard Rock Casinos in Ft. Lauderdale include *Wheel of Fortune* and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*; one of the most popular fruit machines in UK casinos feature characters from *The Simpsons*. Casinos across the globe use slot machines that evoke some sort of positive, preferably money-making association for the gambler: *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Cleopatra*, *Elvis*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *Jeopardy!*, *The Price is Right*, and even Tabasco (yes, as in the condiment that makes everything good) have all appeared on slot machines.

Familiarity is not only useful in getting gamblers to step up to the slots, it's also useful in keeping them playing – people are more likely to continue to play a complicated slot machine game if they feel comfortable with it and the images it uses.

### **The Sweet Smell of Success**

Casinos also use what's called sensory marketing—employing subtle tactile, auditory or olfactory cues to keep gamblers happy. While the rumor that casinos pump in extra oxygen into their rarified gambling atmosphere to induce positive feelings and alertness is still just a rumor, some casinos do, however, use pleasant smells around gambling areas. Think walking by a bakery, with the delicious scent of fresh-baked bread wafting out onto the sidewalk – make no mistake, that's intentional.

Studies have shown that **when a pleasant smell was sprayed on a certain area of slot machines in Harrah's Las Vegas casino, revenue from those machines was on average 45 percent higher than revenue from odorless machines.** Following that study, other casinos moved to try introducing scents, including the Hilton in Las Vegas, which also reported higher revenues from scented slot machines. According to some reports (the BBC, for example), US casinos have also used “pheromones” to promote gambling, but that claim, just like the extra oxygen, remains a rumor.

### **Sound It Out**

While some casinos do use music to help lull gamblers into a trance-like state, nearly all casinos use sound in general as a way to imply a lucky atmosphere, so to speak: Basically, the only sounds you hear in a casino are the sounds of winning. Slot machines, for example, are rigged up to make very loud noises when someone wins; it's not only the ringing bells, the joyous (if ring tone-y) music, it's also the loud sound of coins hitting the metal tray. (As an aside, some casinos are sadly doing away with coin-operated slot machines all together. Slot machines at the Hard Rock Casino in Ft. Lauderdale, for example, spit out printed slips of paper that can be redeemed for money at various ATM-like kiosks positioned around the slot pit. The benefit for the casino is clear: While you no longer have the satisfying sound of change hitting a metal tray ringing through the slot pit, you do have people pumping greater amounts of money into the machines at each play.)

Essentially, casino design all comes down to fostering an environment conducive to happily losing money – and that environment is mind-numbingly frenetic, right down to the ugliness of the carpets. It's like a magic trick: Using a surfeit of sensations – the sounds, lights, mirrors, colors – casinos induce a sense of disorientation and over-stimulation. That's the misdirection. Your only lifeline in this sea of dynamic madness is the game in front of you, so you keep playing, putting in dollar after dollar, laying down chip after chip. And that's the trick.