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SEVEN

How Corporations Shape Our Understanding of Problems with Gambling and Their Solutions

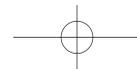
Rebecca Cassidy

[7.0]

In little more than one decade, global gambling revenue (the amount staked minus winning payouts) has more than doubled, from just over US\$200 billion to US\$450 billion (GBGC 2015). The origins of this remarkable expansion can be traced to the United States, where, during the 1970s, state governments were attracted to the potential tax revenue of regulated gambling. Previously, there had been no legal casinos in the United States outside Nevada. Today gambling is available in all states apart from Hawaii and Utah, and eighteen states have commercial land-based or riverboat casinos. In addition, so-called 'tribal' or 'Indian' 'gaming', protected since 1988, has grown into a US\$28 billion industry (NIGC 2014). American corporations favour the softer term *gaming* over *gambling* and have worked hard to encourage legislators to use this term despite the confusion it causes. Between 1974 and 1994 the amount of money Americans legally wagered rose a staggering 2,800 percent, from US\$17 billion to US\$482 billion (Frontline 1996).

[7.1]

As the market for casino gambling in the United States approached saturation in the early 2000s, operators shifted their focus to Asia, which overtook North America as the largest regional market in 2010 (GBGC 2013). In Macau, home to the only legal casino gambling in China, gross revenue grew from less than US\$1 billion in 2003 to US\$46 billion by 2013. Despite a recent slowdown in growth, the regulated market in Macau is approximately seven times the size of Las Vegas (Riley 2014).



The impact of gambling expansion on global health is largely unknown. Gamblers are a difficult-to-reach population, reticent about being identified, and often guarded about their activities. As a result, research often focuses on small numbers of self-selected subjects (treatment-seeking ‘problem’ gamblers) and rarely includes a longitudinal dimension (Scholes-Balog et al. 2015). Despite these difficulties, studies in diverse settings including Australia (Billi et al. 2014), the United States (Petry et al. 2005) and South Korea (Park et al. 2010) suggest that people experiencing problems with gambling can suffer from a range of health issues including increased rates of mental illness (Dowling et al. 2015), alcohol and drug dependency (Petry et al. 2005) and elevated suicide rates (Petry and Kiluck 2002).

[7.2]

Estimates of the social costs of gambling vary widely (Wynne and Shaffer 2003, 120). In 1999, the Australian Productivity Commission suggested that the annual economic impact of a person experiencing a severe problem with gambling ranged from AUS\$6,000 to AUS\$19,000 (1999, 9.10) while in the United States estimates vary from US\$9,000 (Thompson et al. 1997) to US\$50,000 (Kindt 1995). It is also widely accepted that the impact of problem gambling is not limited to individuals and that on average, five to ten family members and friends are affected by each person with gambling problems (Australian Productivity Commission 1999, 23).

[7.3]

Gambling in Europe and North America was generally prohibited on moral grounds prior to the emergence of neoliberal ideologies in the 1980s that rejected state intervention. Gambling was reframed as a leisure activity and an issue of consumer freedom. A key element of this normalisation process has been the creation of an abnormal category of behaviour called ‘problem gambling’ that effectively frees ‘normal’ gambling of negative associations and provides corporations with a socially acceptable product to promote.

[7.4]

Based on data gathered from members of the gambling industries in Europe, North America and Asia, this chapter describes how corporations seek to shape our understanding of gambling. It focuses on the maintenance of two important tropes that underpin the current framing of commercial gambling, ‘responsible gambling’ and ‘problem gambling’, and the support by industry for research maintaining these ideas.

[7.5]

BACKGROUND

[7.6]

In 1996 the U.S. government created the National Gambling Impact Commission, with a budget of US\$5 million, to assess the effects of the rapid growth in gambling in the country. The same year, the American Gaming Association, the trade organisation representing the land-based casino industry, founded by former chairman of the Republican Party Frank

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Fahrenkopf, created the National Centre for Responsible Gambling (NCRG). The role of the NCRG was to fund research to 'identify the risk factors for gambling disorders and determine methods for not only treating the disorder but preventing it, much like physicians can identify patients at risk from cardiovascular disease long before a heart attack' (NCRG website 2009, quoted in Schüll 2012, 261).

[7.8] Anthropologist Natasha Schüll, who spent more than fifteen years conducting fieldwork in Las Vegas argues that

[7.9] by the mid-1990s, the gambling industry had already grasped (like the alcohol industry had some decades earlier) that a medical diagnosis linked to the excessive consumption of its product could serve to deflect attention away from the product's potentially problematic role in promoting that consumption, and onto the biological and psychological vulnerabilities of a small minority of its customers. (2012, 261)

[7.10] The field of gambling studies developed alongside the commercial industry and is by psychologists who identify, quantify and evaluate the treatment of individuals who have been harmed by gambling and, to a lesser extent, the impact of these experiences on their families and friends. Gambling that damages the health and well-being of individuals and their families is described as 'problem gambling' or 'pathological gambling', a more severe, clinically identifiable condition (Petry 2006). These approaches typically locate causal factors within individual behaviour, or physiological or psychological makeup, while largely overlooking structural factors such as the industry's role in society, social influences on individual choices, and the adequacy of regulation. Such framing is conducive to industry expansion, and lends legitimacy to gambling taxes as a source of government revenue (Hancock 2011; Kingma 2008).

[7.11] METHODS

[7.12] The concept of 'problem gambling' emerged during the 1980s, replacing the pejorative term *degenerate gambler*. It provides a medicalised framework for research (Reith 2007) that currently dominates gambling studies, which is traditionally housed within the discipline of psychology. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have investigated the diverse economic functions and symbolic meanings of gambling as a form of exchange. In the 1970s, Geertz described betting on cock fights in Bali as a competition for status between men in an extremely hierarchical society (Geertz 2005). In contrast, the hunting and gathering Hadza of Tanzania used gambling to reduce inequality, staking meat in order to create a distribution based on chance rather than differences in hunting ability in the 1960s (Woodburn 1982). Riches (1975) also found a moral obligation to gamble among Inuit communities in the 1970s whereby games helped to randomly distribute scarce commodities. Studies of commercial gam-

bling in California (Hayano 1982) and Las Vegas (Schüll 2012) have similarly focused on the broader impacts of gambling as a means of distributing wealth and status.

Participant observation is fundamental to anthropological research into social processes. Bronislaw Malinowski (1922), credited with inventing participant observation in the 1920s, claimed that spending long periods of time with subjects enables anthropologists to compare what people say they do with what they actually do. This approach is particularly helpful in relation to gambling and other stigmatised activities. If anthropologists spend sufficient time in betting shops, casinos or bingo halls, people may begin to behave as they would before the anthropologist arrived. At the same time, anthropological fieldwork must be overt and all participants must provide informed consent. In practice this means that the knowledge created through participant observation is reflexive and dialogic, that is, it emerges from the relationships between the anthropologist and research participants.

This chapter is based on fieldwork with the people who produce and shape gambling. The majority of current research focuses on the consumption of gambling, and comparatively little is written about production issues such as the structure of the industry, what motivates employees, and how they view their work. The gambling industry is, in its own words, 'secretive, litigious and extremely well-funded' (North American casino executive 2012), and gaining access is very difficult. During the last nine years I have spent extended periods of time with gamblers in betting shops, casinos and bingo halls. I trained and worked as a cashier in betting shops and in social gaming studios in London, and at a mobile casino operator in Gibraltar.

These conventional ethnographic encounters were augmented by more disparate experiences at conferences, where key industry actors gather to express a collective identity. Between 2010 and 2015 I attended thirty industry conferences in London, Tokyo, Barcelona, Berlin, Dublin, Macau and Greece and listened to over a hundred presentations. Related research has included semi-structured interviews with 132 individuals, including traditional gambling operators, twenty newcomers to the gambling industry who had backgrounds in the media, console gaming, financial services and marketing gaming lawyers, investors, politicians, regulators, journalists, researchers and treatment providers.

The gambling industry is heterogeneous: many people are interested in speaking openly with someone from outside their usual circle; others are guarded and view conversations with independent researchers as either a waste of time or a potential threat to commercial secrecy or reputation. I have anonymised the following quotes, providing only basic information that should not allow insiders to identify one another.

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FINDINGS

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In May 2014, Alan Feldman, chairman of the NCRG and senior vice president of public affairs for MGM Resorts International, addressed a conference in Japan, where casino gambling is currently banned. Earlier in the year, Japanese president Shinzo Abe had indicated that ‘integrated resorts’, featuring casinos similar to those found in Las Vegas and Singapore, would be legalised ahead of the 2020 Olympics as part of plans to kick start the economy. Media predicted that casinos could generate as much as US\$40 billion annually, and become potentially the second-biggest market after Macau (Yamaguchi 2014). Asked to distinguish between problem gaming and responsible gaming, Feldman told the audience of Japanese legislators that ‘we need to acknowledge the fact that there are people who are addicted to gambling, but their addiction is a brain issue, a brain disorder that is going to exist whether or not there is legalised gambling in the environment’.¹ He described responsible gambling as the universal solution to problems that may be associated with, but not ‘caused’ by, legal gambling, arguing that ‘the notion of responsible gaming is very real, it’s very identifiable, it’s very consistent country to country in various parts of the world and it is something that is readily applicable here in Japan’. This distinction has been pivotal to industry expansion, emphasizing self-control of individual behaviour, and directing the discourse to a focus on treatment and education rather than limiting the supply or promotion of gambling.

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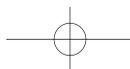
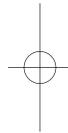
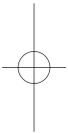
Corporate actors present problems with gambling as an individual frailty that affects a minority of people. In 2011, for example, Neil Goulden, then chairman emeritus of the UK gambling corporation Gala Coral Group, and chairman of the GREaT Foundation (established to raise money from the industry to pay for research, education and treatment of gambling problems) told a UK House of Commons select committee that

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the problem gambler is obsessive, has a psychological problem and will bet on all forms of gambling. You are, therefore, dealing with the nature of the individual. They will often have drug problems, they will often have alcohol problems, they are predominantly smokers, and the person has a problem, because gambling in itself is not intrinsically addictive. (United Kingdom 2011)

[7.21]

Speaking more recently as chairman of the Association of British Bookmakers (ABB) and chair of the Responsible Gambling Trust (RGT), an industry-funded charity that ‘funds education, prevention and treatment services and commissions research to broaden public understanding of gambling related harm’ (Responsible Gambling Trust 2015), Goulden stated that there was ‘very clear evidence that problem gambling is about the individual and not any specific gambling product or products’ (ABB 2013a). In the United States, the executive director of the NCRG





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told a *Salon* journalist that ‘things are not addictive, they’re just not. Addiction is a relationship between the object and a vulnerable person, and if you don’t have that vulnerability, the odds are you won’t get addicted. I play a slot machine for 10 minutes and I’m so bored I want to shoot myself’ (quoted in Strickland 2008).

The corollary of problem gambling is ‘responsible gambling’, a concept based on the twin principles of informed choice and consumer freedom that emphasises education, minimal interventions and self-management and deemphasises restrictions on the supply of gambling that might impact on the rights of the ‘normal’ majority to consume freely. Striking parallels exist with positions adopted by the alcohol and tobacco industries. The recently created Senet Group (2015), which promotes responsible gambling in the UK, for instance, was modelled on the Portman Group, which promotes responsible drinking, and both industries support voluntary codes of practice, emphasise harm ‘minimisation’ (or ‘reduction’)—a concept initially used to counter punitive approaches to illicit drug use (McCambridge et al. 2014)—and establish charitable bodies in anticipation of regulatory changes. The RGT, for example, was established in the UK before the Gambling Act of 2005, while the Senet Group emerged before the release of the RGT’s machine research in December 2014² and the general election in May 2015.

[7.22]

Similarity of approach is underpinned by the movement of key personnel across the alcohol, tobacco and gambling industries. Dirk Vennix, CEO of the ABB between 2011 and 2014 and former director of communications at the Tobacco Manufacturers Association between 2008 and 2011, recently noted that ‘the two industries share many of the same contacts within government, and both have the same challenge—“facing a deluge of regulatory and taxation measures”’ (Welbirg 2012, 18). In October 2014 Chris Searle, former chairman of the Portman Group, addressed an on-line gambling industry conference in Berlin, observing that

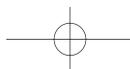
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frankly what has happened looks like a copy and paste job from the drinks industry. I think the gambling industry is 10 to 15 years behind the evolution of the drinks industry when it comes to social responsibility aspects. . . . What are the positive benefits of betting and gambling for society? They are not clearly merchandised and visible to the outsider. (quoted in Totally Gaming 2014)

[7.24]

Despite the fierce competition and deep distrust that exists between rival sectors, the UK gambling industry presents a relatively united front in its endorsement of responsible gambling. In 2013 the Association of British Bookmakers announced that ‘we intend to create a step change in responsible gambling thinking based around informed choice by adult consumers’ (ABB 2013b). For its part, the British Amusement Catering Trade Association (the UK trade association for amusement arcades and casinos) has noted that ‘Social Responsibility is about caring for those few

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individuals who have a gambling addiction and need help’[AQ: Please add citation for this quote]. In 2014 the Industry Group For Responsible Gambling, which comprises the ABB, BACTA, Bingo Association, National Casino Forum and Remote Gambling Association, came together to endorse this shared conception of ‘responsible gambling’ (Gaming Business 2014).

[7.26]

The industry has also been united in emphasising individual freedom. The online company Unibet, which describes itself as a ‘leader in the European Moneytainment® industry’, describes responsibility as ‘part of their corporate DNA’ and defends the freedom of the ‘normal’ majority to gamble on its website, as well as the commercial right to operate across borders:

[7.27]

For the vast majority of people, gambling—online and offline—is a fun and entertaining hobby or social activity. The questions to answer are: what do 98 per cent of gamblers get out of their gaming? What do they do right, that the minority does wrong? What good does it do them? What are the moral benefits for society as a whole? . . . When consumer protection at large is based upon an informed choice and self-responsibility, why should European consumers be denied and restricted in their choice to purchase services across borders? (Unibet 2015)

[7.28]

As one senior executive in the UK bookmaking industry argued:

[7.29]

Education, fine. Whatever. We know it doesn’t affect the bottom line. Messaging, fine, same thing. As long as it doesn’t interfere too much with the punter you want to keep going . . . fine. Fewer machines? Lower stakes? Not fine. This is when you get serious. This is risky. Reducing the number of machines is a serious threat to my business. Step one: paint the opposition as ‘Nanny staters’. Most of them are miserable, joyless little shits anyway, so that’s easy. Step 2. Present yourself as a freedom loving, wealth creating hero. Easily done. (Male bookmaker, early forties, London, 2013)

[7.30]

Similarly, Steve Donoghue, industry consultant, secretariat of the Parliamentary All Party Betting & Gaming Group and former special advisor to the Culture, Media & Sport Select Committee Inquiry into the Gambling Act of 2005 said in 2013 that ‘there’s a party going on that the killjoys don’t understand’ (quoted by Bennett 2013). Such attitudes extend beyond the industry. In 2004 then UK culture secretary Tessa Jowell responded to criticism of the Gambling Act by saying that ‘there’s a whiff of snobbery in some of the opposition to new casinos. . . . They are entitled to those views, but they are not entitled to force them on others’ (quoted in Kite 2004). Similar portrayals of interventions as threats to freedom, the oppression of the ‘normal’ majority, or evidence of class prejudice arguments are made in the United States (Caesars 2014) and Australia (Brewster 2012).



While these views are normative, industry newcomers with backgrounds in mobile and online communications or financial services are sometimes more reflexive. An executive at a leading UK online operator mused that

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gambling operators talk about ‘responsible gambling’—how much did they have to pay to get that phrase into the gambling jargon? ‘Promoting responsible gambling’. Anyone who has read anything about messaging can see what a brilliant sleight of hand that was for the gambling industry. Well, just try out these two different approaches: Preventing problem gambling. Promoting responsible gambling. Which would you rather have? What about cigs? ‘Preventing chain smoking’ or ‘Promoting moderate smoking’: which would you sign up for?

[7.32]

Another executive involved in mobile gambling in the UK explained that

[7.33]

when we came into his business we were absolutely flabbergasted that there was a built-in cushion for bad products. Problem gambling! When gambling goes wrong! (laughs) You know, you get this big let off. It says, ‘Don’t worry if people get addicted to your machine or your game—there are some real weirdos out there. What can you do? People are weak’. At a very basic level, it shifts responsibility from the industry to the consumer, and that is great for us, but not so great for you.

[7.34]

The efficacy of responsible gambling measures, often enshrined in codes of practice, has proven difficult to assess for want of baseline data and shared methodologies (Livingstone et al. 2014). However, a study of Australian clubs showed that

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responsible gambling practices have had little effect on the way the vast majority of respondents think about their gambling, feel about their gambling, how often they gamble, how long they gamble for and how much they spend. . . . Responsible gambling practices cannot be considered as being very effective for most problem gamblers or for most of those who are at risk. (Hing 2004, 42)

[7.36]

Corporate Influence of Gambling Research

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There is profound disagreement within gambling studies about how relationships between corporations and researchers should be managed (Cassidy, Loussaourn and Pisac, 2014; Livingstone and Adams 2015). The RGT and NCRG favour a partnership model, and several senior researchers accept industry research funding. In 2014 Alex Blaszczyński, editor of the journal *International Gambling Studies* (IGS), received AUS\$1.2 million from the New South Wales clubs industry, which hosts the majority of Australia’s controversial ‘pokie’ machines (Livingstone and Woolley 2007; Nicholls 2014). On the IGS website Blaszczyński states that

[7.39]

I do not hold any ongoing position, receive ongoing or significant funding, and am not engaged in any business or organisation that

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creates a conflict of interest (real, perceived, actual or potential) in the work I would conduct as Editor of International Gambling Studies. (International Gambling Studies 2015)

[7.41] He acknowledges, however, 'financial professional dealings with the gambling industry and various State and Federal governments' that have include research grants from gambling corporations, governments, and research bodies within Australia, the United States and Canada, and compensation and reimbursement for expenses for providing expertise and reports to governments and industry corporations (International Gambling Studies 2015). Notwithstanding publisher guidelines (International Society of Addiction Journal Editors 2015), the grants, compensation and reimbursement are not quantified nor are their sources disclosed.

[7.42] Mark Griffiths, arguably the leading UK figure in gambling studies, lists numerous grants and paid consultancies from gambling operators on four continents (Nottingham Trent 2015). Griffiths, with co-author Michael Auer (2015), recently defended the right of academics to work as consultants, arguing that 'research and consultancy are two very separate activities' with different aims and 'the real issue is whether doing consultancy with the gambling industry in any way impacts on independently funded and subsequently published gambling research'. Their position is that 'the gambling industry can benefit from our expertise and that there is nothing morally wrong in what we do. To us, this is totally separate from research activity'. Yet Auer has also described how he and Griffiths 'did one analysis with the data from Austrian Lotteries, who are the only internet gaming operator in Austria. In return for using our software, we used their data to publish scientific papers' (Auer 2013).

[7.43] Interviews with researchers and members of the industry revealed varied and subtle forms of influence. As one veteran researcher working in the UK explained:

[7.44] The industry are very good, they can offer a very nice little perk. I was the recipient of quite a lot of corporate hospitality, very nice, thank you very much! They can do that so they are very good at getting people on their side by legitimate acceptable ways in this country or not. I mean I don't know if they cross the line, they probably do at times, like everybody else does.

[7.45] Other researchers described more direct approaches. One academic, who had worked in both Australia and the UK, recalled how 'a professional organisation wanted to find out that the rate of problem gambling was less than 1% or something like that. My boss was offered a £10,000 bribe paid straight into his bank account. This bloke turned up in his Jaguar looking a bit like Arthur Daley off Minder'.

[7.46] Relatedly, fears of legal action and intimidation can have a chilling effect on researchers and several had left the field as a result:

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With the anxiety that I always felt about potentially upsetting the industry and colleagues who were closely linked with them, I had enough. I didn't even finish writing up, because it was going to be too much. So no one ever told me not to publish, but in a sense I self-sabotaged. I was really scared about potentially annoying the industry and then getting my reputation trashed, because I saw that happen at [an event] and it really was horrible. So I had a choice, say everything is fine. In other words, lie. Or keep quiet and not expose myself to that critical attention. Wasn't very brave of me was it?

[7.47]

Another UK researcher described the actions of corporate lawyers who attended the launch of a new report:

[7.48]

We ran some seminars and workshops to disseminate our findings and people came to those and attacked us—people from the industry primarily. . . . They tried to intimidate us indirectly in terms of what we published. And to discredit us in the eyes of other people. No one tried to shape directly what we wrote, but I didn't try to take the work forward after that.

[7.49]

This supports the opinion of an Australian researcher with more than twenty years' experience in the field who explained that 'most research is managed by never asking questions which are likely to produce embarrassing results'. A gambling executive explained this strategy in more detail:

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People in the industry are just suspicious about research because, let's face it, the likelihood is that they already know if there's a problem and their job is to keep it quiet. If research comes up that we don't like then you either say it's not comparable, because it comes from somewhere else, or the offering is different, or regulation is different or whatever, or you look at the methodology and you say well it's only based on 50 people so it's hardly representative, or you just get hold of some other research you've done already that says the opposite. It's not difficult.

[7.51]

Another UK-based industry veteran explained that he would just ignore bad news, before expressing his unhappiness to the charitable organisations responsible:

[7.52]

We just don't respond. Don't provide any oxygen, but behind the scenes we might give someone a bollocking for funding a bit of research. If we sit on a board we might show that we weren't very happy. When GamCare comes round cap in hand we might point out that we weren't very happy. Just the usual things that you would expect really.

[7.53]

CONCLUSION

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Gambling studies is an emerging field and has yet to engage with the epistemological and ethical arguments that have taken place in alcohol or tobacco research and anthropological research into how ideas about gam-

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bling problems are reproduced helps to explain the general absence of reliable evidence in the area (Disley et al. 2011). Specifically, current approaches to analysis serve the interests of a powerful industry seeking to expand globally, and of governments keen to reap potential benefits in terms of employment or tax revenue. The common interest of the gambling industry and gambling studies researchers in perpetuating the idea of problem gambling as an individual shortcoming is a key element of how this discourse is framed, as is the willingness of researchers to accept industry funding (Orford 2012).

[7.57]

The impact on the research agenda, the range of methods used by researchers and the human geography of the field are profound. The research agenda remains focused on measuring and treating ‘problem gamblers’, and minimizing or reducing harm through education and self-management. The range of methods employed is narrow and mono-disciplinary, and the definition of accepted evidence is restricted to that which can be measured or counted, which is constrained by access issues (Young 2013). The result upon this fiercely politicised field is that broad questions about corporate influence and global health are marginalised. As commercial gambling expands into new markets globally, it is critical that effective ways to assess and counter its impacts on public health are devised. The intention of this chapter is to bring gambling studies into a wider conversation where it can benefit from insights developed in similar fields, and acknowledge the limitations of its rather singular approach to knowledge creation to date.

[7.58]

FUNDING

[7.59]

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted as part of a project funded by the European Research Council under the European Union’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) / ERC Grant Agreement no. 263443.

[7.60]

NOTES

[7n1]

1. Speeches recorded while attending the conference in Tokyo.

[7n2]

2. For the full texts of the long-awaited machines research, see: www.responsiblegamblingtrust.org.uk/Research-Publications.

[7.61]

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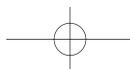
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