

SNG-Nowlan-Gambling at the R Bar

Gambling at the R Bar

By Jim Nowlan

I walked recently down the main street of my hometown to the R Bar tavern to try out the new video gaming machines. Not a gambler, I did so for research on this column about why the state of Illinois pushes gambling onto its citizens in such an unseemly way.

The small, dimly lit bar (aren't they all) has three machines; the maximum is five. They are all electronically tied to the state's computers somewhere; after all, the state government is operating these games in order to fleece its own citizens out of their money.

Legal gambling is the only state activity in which the state's citizens must lose in order for the state to generate revenue.

I sit at the Instant Winner multi-game machine. It is a vertical box, about the dimensions of a human, with three landscape-shaped panel screens stacked on top of one another, all screaming bright colors.

I put a \$10 bill in the machine and touch on the screen a game called Egyptian Quest. Symbols of Pharaohs and pyramids fill the screen. The machine is a 1-cent and nickel bet device, but you can bet up to ten "lines," which apparently deludes you into thinking you have more chances of winning. This means a maximum bet of 50 cents.

Then the "player" pushes a button, the machine and symbols whirl, and zippo-presto the machine tells you if you have "won" anything. I put "won" in parentheses because even though I won only 10 cents on my 50 cent bet, the machine comes alive with lights flashing and bells ringing.

So now my account in the machine is down to \$9.60. I push again, and again, and again.

There is nothing else to do but push the button, like Pavlov's dog. The positive reinforcement comes in just enough frequency from the clanging bells to keep me going.

Becky, the bartender, peers over my shoulder; it was a quiet late afternoon in the bar. "Last week, I put in \$3 and won \$80," she said, with a note of pride. This spurs me on.

My account reaches \$14.20 before it starts slipping. After a while, I am down to \$7.60, then up to \$11.30, then back down to \$5.

I play Jacks or Better (poker, but no input from the "player"), Royal Spins and Vegas Classic, all at the same machine.

Yet, sigh, at the end of a full hour, I had lost my 10 research dollars.

Video gaming is just the latest wrinkle in the now eight forms of legal gaming in Illinois, of which the lottery and the casino "boats" are the most lucrative for the state.

Gambling is big business in Illinois. The state netted \$1.2 billion last year from gamblers, though the amount is less than 2 percent of total state revenues.

But it is real money to individuals.

Lottery spending last year amounted to \$208 for every man, woman, and child in the state (about half is returned in prizes), and the casino boats' adjusted gross revenues (the bettors' losses) amounted to \$120 for every person in Illinois.

As a civil libertarian, I am not against a person gambling. Yet I find it reprehensible that the state is pushing gambling onto its citizens through massive marketing campaigns and by putting gambling within arms' reach at checkout counters and in bars.

At one time, a person had to physically go to a track to bet on the ponies. Now the state encourages “advance deposit wagering,” which allows a person to fill an electronic account with money and gamble online.

The Chicago Tribune recently did a major piece that pointed out poor people tend to spend more of their limited income on gambling than do the more affluent.

The tragedy of the Trib’s story is that state gambling officials are wringing their hands over their difficulties in enticing *new* people to gamble.

The state is trying its darndest to lure more upscale residents to begin buying more, and more expensive, lottery tickets.

Expansion of gambling is stalled in the legislature. This is not so much because legislators are opposed, but because the present gambling enterprises don’t want more competition, which cannibalizes their profits.

The state should not expand what is already ubiquitous. And we should limit the amount of gambling marketing the state does, to limit the damage.