

Playing the Penny Slots

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Penny slots! What could be more egalitarian! There, tucked in the rows of quarter machines and the truly pricey dollar machines, was a cluster of penny slots. And they were popular; almost every machine was taken. I had no idea you could come to Las Vegas and gamble for pennies.

Discovering the penny slots was a bit like stumbling into the Penny Arcade on Disneyland's main street, where for an actual penny-a-pop visitors can watch mini-dramas in the kinetoscopes or activate the fortune telling machines whose gypsy automatons read the future. As an oasis of the past, the Penny Arcade offers quaintly simple amusements as antitheses and respite from Mainstreet's other shops, so overstuffed with Disney merchandise. Most kids today know that pennies are worthless. They won't buy you candy as they did in the Depression, nor moving picture amusements such as Disney imagines they did around 1910. What's curious (and possibly contradictory) about Disney's Penny Arcade is its grasp of America on the cusp of becoming the mass entertainment capital of the world. In that bygone world, a penny may have really mattered, and not just for its pre-inflationary value, but because it actually functioned as an instrument of exchange. Thus, a penny, dropped in the kinetoscope's slot, activates the machine and renders the exchange between moving images and the consumer's gratification.

Steeped in recollections of the Penny Arcade, I made my way through densely packed rows of machines to better inspect the penny slots. Clearly, the Disney imagineers had not worked their magic on the casino floor. The penny slots were in no way distinguishable from the other machines but for the 1¢ sign suspended over them. They were merely thrust in between quarter and dollar machines, like a Dollar General Store interjected into a suburban shopping mall, its tacky storefront next to a Sears and just steps away from Macy's. With a Dollar General Store, no one need leave the mall empty handed. Air freshener, hair accessories, cat toys, and scores of useful but unnecessary items, the Dollar General offers something for everyone and makes anyone a consumer.

Similarly, the penny slots offer every visitor to Las Vegas a piece of the action. Slide a dollar bill into the machine's maw and get a hundred plays. Sadly, the penny slots don't have a penny slot. A booming economy and inflation have made the dollar the new penny. But even at a dollar per hundred plays, the penny slot offers a much bigger bang for a buck than all those other mechanical maws on vending and change-making machines

that eat our dollars in exchange for Snickers bars and quarters for the Laundromat.

Today, it can cost \$3.50 or more to run a load of wash at a laundromat — and \$4.50 for the bigger machines. Add the dryers, and the price of one load of washed and dried clothes comes to at least \$5.00. Imagine how long you can play a penny slot for \$5.00. If you drag the play out, watch the little icons roll into place and avoid maximizing your bet with non-linear and diagonal combinations that cost between 5-10 cents a play, you can spend 2-3 hours on a machine, especially if you win “free” additional plays.

At the penny slots, players are spending time, not money. And, why not? The weather in Las Vegas is more often harsh than hospitable. A biting wind and daytime temperatures in the 40s greeted me in early December. And I’m sure summer is even more exacting. Against the desert’s raw reality, the casinos offer climate controlled refuge. The Harrah’s where I stayed vacuums in the visitors through widely gaping entrances that curiously can’t be found when you want to leave (an effect of a sunken playing floor that puts the exit above eye level). I finally learned how to chart my way out by memorizing a path past a row of potted plants, then alongside the gaming tables. Then the line of people for the buffet came into view, and I knew the exit would be near.

If spending time in the casino is a consequence of an architecture designed to get you in and keep you there, then it’s time spent in post-modern limbo. A huge but entirely closed world compressed under low ceilings and bathed in subdued artificial light, the casino wholly erases the temporal and spatial markers that otherwise define a visitor’s life at home or work. In their place, a thousand electronic ringtone-like bleeps and bells — the sound of the ceaseless slots — replace clock time and the shift from diurnal to nocturnal life with an unremitting temporality of the ever present. As for space, it’s both fragmented and highly Taylorized, with slots separate from playing tables, and playing tables set apart from the sports betting area. The casino replicates the particularization of function once commonly associated with the industrial workplace, here retooled for the work of spending.

But what if you want to spend your time on other pursuits? Sorry, no such luck. All walkways and transportation options on the Strip are designed to take you nowhere but into another casino — or shopping mall — or mall/casino. Everything parallels the Strip, the roadway where cars and vans outfitted with billboards cruise up and down in a continual display that

might lead you to believe that the Strip folds back on itself, in Moebius-fashion. From Mandalay Bay to Circus Circus, sidewalks extend top to bottom, their Strip-hugging trajectories broken only by four elaborate pedestrian bridges, designed to protect visitors from the hazards of bumper-to-bumper traffic and ever gawking drivers. For speedy, but expensive transport, a monorail plies the Strip, depositing foot-weary vacationers from one casino to the next. The entire built environment is intended to keep visitors in line and on their game.

What's more, there is no elsewhere; and certainly no place to sit down that doesn't involve spending money. As the hotels exist solely to funnel visitors to the gaming floor, all obstructions have been removed. There are no lobby chairs or couches — indeed, there's no lobby, just a counter for checking in. And outside, there's only the flow of the Strip — not a single grassy knoll, park bench, or boxed planter — nowhere to rest or recline. Hence, visitors who want to catch the Bellagio's fountain display are forced to stand and wait. Tired, they grip the parapets that surround the hotel's rendition of Lake Cuomo. To sit would require a graceful leap to the top of the parapet and then a balancing act on its rounded surface. In Las Vegas, being on your feet and moving has more to do with recycling visitors back into the casinos where, with the only chairs in town allocated to the buffet, bars, restaurants, gaming tables, sports betting lounge, and slot machines, the penny slots offer the exhausted tourist a bit of rest at a bargain price.

Many of the players on the penny slots appeared to be killing time, especially the ones I encountered at 4:00AM as I walked bleary-eyed through the animated and brightly lit casino on my way to the airport for a crack-of-dawn departure. Struck by the number of pre-dawn players, I wondered if they had played all night. Were they somehow captivated by the machine's action, unable to tear themselves away for fear of missing that one play that would score a jackpot? Maybe they had a neighbor like me who came back from his Las Vegas vacation, glowing with tales of hitting \$2,700 on the penny slots — and not once, but twice! The tedium of his late night play was suddenly broken by bells, whistles, and a staff person who magically emerged to bestow \$2,000 — both times. Of course, he was maximizing his pennies, spending \$1.50 per play. As he put it, "The wins canceled my losses."

Enough observation. The time had come to give the penny slots a whirl. As a neophyte, I eschewed the advice of a more experienced gambling friend who told me to always choose a machine at the end of a row and on an aisle. Apparently, casinos want their customers to see and get excited by the

wins; so, the machines closest to pedestrian traffic are more often set to win. Putting aside all thoughts of tactics, I let myself be guided by the graphics. At first, I gravitated toward the old style iconography — the cherries, grapes, limes, and lucky number 7s that I associated with the one-armed bandits of the 50s. Seeing them on one of the penny slots, I instantly recalled one of my family's long summer road trips. It must have been in the late 50s. On our way from Southern California to Utah's natural wonders, we were somewhere in Nevada's endlessly barren and hot landscape, where the only point of attraction was the occasional overheated car, hood raised and spewing steam out of its radiator. At one point, we pulled off the highway and into a gas station. Escaping the car and endless hours of confinement, I followed my Dad into the station. There, perched on stools, two leather-skinned cowboys played the slots. Stunned to see "real" cowboys and old enough to consider gambling "illegal," I couldn't help but stare. My Dad broke my trance with something of a fatherly gesture. He reached into his pocket for some quarters and showed me how to work the machine — insert the coin, pull the lever, then watch the fruits spin until they fall fatally into place.

On the verge to relive the past and as I started towards the machine with old-style graphics, my eyes were sidetracked by the amazing visuals on many of the adjacent machines. They were themed! My favorite — the one I finally fed \$20.00 over three days of sporadic play — offered a pre-Columbian lost world. Rather than limes and cherries, golden masks, turquoise necklaces, and feathered headdresses cycled through the machines visuals. The wild card was a Mayan temple. Four temples anywhere and a big version of the temple immediately filled the screen, while a deep and mysterious voice announced that I — the lucky player — would now be able to enter the temple for some "free" plays. In succeeding to open the temple for some off-penny play, I had essentially won "free" time — time not computed in dollars and cents. Given that so much of our "free" time (vacations, sick days, discretionary time, comp-time) is really factored into and tabulated with our work time, the penny slot's interlude of free plays allows the player the thrill of getting something for nothing.

But my victory was brief and quickly absorbed back into the larger duration of play. Once inside the temple, I made a wrong choice. The temple disappeared and I was ejected back into the real time of pennies yet to be spent.

During my three day sojourn in and around the slot machines, I did encounter some actual winners — people who attested to wins of \$500 or more. But watching the majority of players engrossed in their play, I realized

that the real point of the penny slot is not to hit the jackpot, but to keep the game going. It's an aim inherited from video games, where the fun ends when you "die" and have to start all over again back at level one. In the case of the penny slots, overcoming death requires the infusion of additional money. Although I never won any money back from the machine, I did succeed in cheating time with numerous excursions into the temple. Hence, some of the time I killed was my own "free" time.

My experience as a player piqued my interest in others who play the penny slots. Most seemed ill-disposed to talk, intent as they were on the business of playing. What's more, the machine itself is built to cocoon the player within the narrow confines of seat, screen, and play button; and mitigates against conversation with others. Even the waitress circling about with 'free' drinks can be a bothersome distraction. Nevertheless, one day while sampling the machines at New York, New York, I struck up a conversation with a woman who chose the machine next to mine. She had arrived on a handicapped scooter and during the time she required to hoist herself off the scooter and onto the machine's chair, I dropped a greeting. She proved to be loquacious, immediately explaining that she had just arrived from Massachusetts. I put her age at just over 70. Indeed, early December (the slow and cheaper season) brought many seniors to Las Vegas and with them a number of handicapped scooters and wheelchairs. I continued to pepper my slot-mate with small talk and learned she was a real devotee of the casinos. She confessed to frequent trips to Foxwoods, a casino near her home, where she consistently plays the slots. Seeing me for a novice, she asked if I had a computer and explained that I could buy gambling games at Wal-Mart. I began to wonder why this woman, who had so many gambling options — both at home and at her local casino — bothered to come to Las Vegas. Travel, what with the scooter, would be awkward at best. When I put the question to her, she explained that she and her husband owned a Las Vegas time-share. It was then that I noticed an elderly man skulking about. "My husband," she pointed with her thumb. "He's already lost his daily limit at the tables." It was barely 2:00 in the afternoon. Clearly, my slot-mate was going to be able to kill a lot more of the day than her husband, particularly as I'd just seen her slide a twenty into the machine.

Seeing the man who had already shot his wad while his wife prepared to play and play, I began to wonder if playing the penny slots is comparable to a minimum wage job. Was the woman devalued as a player, even though she'd be able to play much longer than her high stakes professional husband? The wage laborer might make a hundred dollars in a day, whereas the

professional can make that amount in an hour. But in terms of sex, a trope that haunts my analogy, the woman's prolonged play might be prized over the man's briefer play. As I pondered the comparison, it occurred to me that players on the penny slots have a better chance of breaking even when they lose, if you consider the number of "free" drinks that can be consumed during the time it takes to kill a \$20.00 bill.

My conversation with the woman from Massachusetts made me curious about the other devotees of the penny slots. Those on cell phones blabbing with players in other casinos while avidly punching their own play buttons were definitely unapproachable. Casting about, I spied a man sitting idly at a machine as if he were taking a break. When he smiled in my direction, I took the opportunity to join him. On closer inspection, I realized he was not alone. There, on the chair next to him was his 80-plus year old dad. The son confessed to being in his 60s, and went on to explain that he makes the trip from London, Ontario to Las Vegas a couple of times a year —sometimes with his wife (who likes the shows), and other times with his dad (who whiles away his time at the penny slots). The dad's health seemed iffy; and, indeed, the next day he stayed in his room. My two conversations with older visitors to Las Vegas alerted me to the numbers of elderly parents being escorted by only slightly less elderly sons and daughters. Glancing about and seeing not only scooters, but hunched backs, canes, even mobile oxygen tanks, I suddenly saw the casino as a geriatric final fling where vacationers could spend their pre-postmortems. Perhaps sensing my morbid thoughts, the Canadian mouthed an oft-heard refrain: "We want to spend our money. After all, you can't take it with you."

A true Baby Boomer. The 60 year old had dragooned his dad — and his dad's possible Depression era inclination towards saving — on a junket devoted to eliminating the family inheritance. Unlike the pharaohs, who really thought you could take your possessions with you and thus filled their tombs with their wives and cats, Boomers aim to reap the rewards of accumulated wealth in the here and now. Forget passing it along to future generations. Never mind endowing some worthy cause. Sadly, the Canadian won \$1,000 at the penny slots, thus encumbering himself with a whole lot more to get rid of. In a macabre turn, I wondered if his dad had enough time left to kill.

Contrary to my bleak mood, the slot machines comprise the liveliest part of the casino floor. Their blinking lights and bells make them lures to children who hover about on the margins of play, yearning desperately to test the

machines, but warned away by security guards and signs that declare the gaming areas off limits to children. I caught myself imagining that toddlers would get a real hoot out of the slot machines — boost the fun of a Fisher Price Busy Box to the next level! But, instead of kids, I saw only zombies; like the man right there in front of me who appeared to be plugged into his machine as if on life support. The man's face was ghastly under the casino's fluorescent lights. His eyes stared vacant into the slot machine's screen. Only his hand moved in minimal, repetitive cadence on the play button. Fascinated, I studied the cord looped around his neck and then plugged into the machine. Was it some sort of assisted breathing device? Unable to tear my eyes away and imagining that he might keel over at any minute, I scrutinized the point where his cord entered the machine. Just then, the man, preparing to stand, yanked the cord and pulled a plastic card out of the machine. Was this his credit lifeline? And would the moment of maxing out his card be analogous to heart attack?

No! The plastic card was a Harrah's Rewards card — an accoutrement given to all hotel guests, that I had for some reason not yet received. As soon as I spotted this particular card, I began to see scores of players sporting cards, most of them dangling on cords about their necks, in the same way that workers at hospitals and factories wear their security clearances. So the man with the ghastly face was not hovering close to death, but actively working to accumulate reward points with every play. His card inserted into a card reader, the machine converted every penny spent into even smaller nano-sized points that added up in a system of recycled rewards.

Wow! Suddenly I was in a whole new ball game! All of my assumptions about playing the penny slots fell by the wayside. Here I had been plotting the benefits of killing time against costs calculated on a sliding scale that ran from the low stakes penny slots to the high end gaming tables. Embedded in an old-style calculus where value is pegged to labor, and labor to alienated time on the job, I had construed access to free time as a win. But the system of rewards overturns the logic of productivity just as surely as it does away with free time. Accruing rewards bundles all expenditures of time and money into additional consumptions. Thus, time is never free but always employed in a process of earning points. Even my "free" time spent in the Mayan temple contributed to my accumulation of points. Rewards recycle consumptions into future consumptions and position the consumer as always-already-entered into the next consumption.

Sadly, my 5-day Las Vegas stay yielded a measly 38 reward points. Granted, I only spent \$20.00 on various penny machines, and it took me awhile to understand the system of interlocking casino ownerships that work either for or against earning points. With my Harrah's Rewards card, I could play and gain points at the Rio and Bally's. But New York New York figured in a different ownership package. Any points that I might have earned during my play there fell into the void of untabulated rewards. On the whole, I gained a tremendous appreciation for those visitors whose points earned them a "free" meal at the buffet. Allowed to line up in a special queue, they glowed with the patina of big spenders. After all, you need 400 points to enter the breakfast buffet free of charge, and 900 for the dinner buffet. Put that in the context of 4,000 points for a dinner at the Steakhouse, or 50,000 points for a free airfare for a return visit (coach, booked 30 days in advance). Reflecting on my own efforts to accumulate flier miles on Southwest and US Airways, I found myself wondering if the ratio of expenditure to reward that the airlines use is comparable to the system at Harrah's. No wonder I've achieved so few "free" trips.

Luckily, everything in life has its reward. The frequent buyer program at my local animal feed store tabulates my purchases of wild bird seed towards the reward of a "free" sack of sunflower seeds. Twelve 40lb. sacks earn a free one. Wow, how many winters will it take the birds in my backyard to go through twelve sacks? Then, there's the rewards program attached to my credit cards. One converts every thousand dollars spent at L.L. Bean into a \$10.00 coupon good for more L.L. Bean purchases. Another transforms charged purchases into flier miles. The circularity of purchases and rewards recycles each expenditure into future expenditures. Rewards offer the elusive promise of getting something for nothing, aside from also shackling the consumer to a particular retailer (or casino franchise) thus ensuring customer "loyalty" and brand-recognition. As the advert for the Harrah's Rewards card puts it, "Get more out of life. Save credits up for special occasions or use them to make every visit memorable." Erased are the losses and high interest payments against which all rewards are mortgaged.

Given the fast paced environment of wins vs. losses, my biggest let down in Las Vegas was the absence of cash. I had expected to see green backs on the tables and cascades of coins pouring out of the slot machines. Prior to my trip, I had primed myself with Las Vegas movies. One in particular, Casino with Robert De Niro, takes the viewer into a casino counting room. Here, money is processed on an assembly line where deft-fingered employees bundle and package the loot that the machines have sorted according to

denomination. The movie's voice-over narration mentions that many a counting room employee developed a dangerous case of sticky fingers. The comment triggered my memory of Harry the Hat, a drifter who lived in his van and used the gym where I worked out for his daily shower. A quirky humanitarian, Harry claimed to run something of an underground railroad for the homeless, transporting them from towns where they were persecuted to places he deemed more hospitable. Harry also rescued stray cats. At the time I knew him, he shared his van and the truck-stop food he favored with six cats. Harry was talkative, but never very coherent. I sensed he had been a grifter who spent his heyday in Las Vegas. One traumatic tale kept cycling through Harry's reminiscences. Piecing together the bits, I gathered that Harry and a team of his cohorts had worked out a system to skim off the casino's take. They made themselves rich — had more money than they could spend. Of course, they flashed it, bought clothes and jewelry. Eventually, they were caught. Harry, as ringleader, was taken before the casino's owner, who roughed him up in his office. Then, in true movie-fashion, he ordered his henchmen to take Harry into the desert. There, they beat him and left him for dead. Did I believe Harry? Even if I doubted the particulars of his tale, I couldn't doubt that Harry was a broken man. Nor could I disregard the invective that peppered his comments about the casino owner (a man still alive today — a prominent and respected businessman, whose casinos are only a portion of his larger financial empire). Then, too, there was De Niro, who slid in and out of Harry's rote condemnations. According to Harry, the actor was in cahoots with his erstwhile boss. So, what's real? Is Harry's tale a blend of fantasy and paranoia? Had he seen too many mob-inspired movies, or was his story the reality behind the movies?

Much of the romance — and infamy — of Las Vegas is rooted in the dream of winning fistfuls of cash. But what if there is no cash in Las Vegas? What if instead of coins gushing into a trough, the slot machine issues a crummy cash register receipt? What if instead of the clatter of loot falling out of the trough and onto the floor, we have to take our crummy receipts to the Rewards Counter? — there to redeem them. And for what? — the breakfast buffet? I wonder how many visitors just don't bother to redeem a chit for \$5.00 or \$10.00 dollars. Do some fear being taken for penny-pinchers when they line up to redeem a paltry winning? How many chits go unredeemed? Are the casinos allied with the retailers who double their profits on the thousands of Christmas gift certificates that each year go unredeemed. The chit we tear up, the gift certificate we lose in a drawer, think of all the pennies that accrue back to corporate winners.

Part of my dismay at seeing Las Vegas as a cashless desert derives from the wonderment that I as a child attached to money. In the 50s, neither I nor anyone I knew received an allowance. Except for the dimes we banked with our in-school passbook accounts, real money only came into our hands with a birthday card from a distant, barely remembered, but presumably wealthy relative. Imagine, then, how exciting it was to behold the rolls of quarters that my aunt and uncle carted home from the bank and packed in their suitcase in preparation for their annual Las Vegas vacation. Imagine, too, the silver dollars that my Dad brought home after a business trip to Las Vegas — two each for my brother and me. Apparently, the hotel had given him a whole roll of silver dollars to warm up his play on the machines. My eyes were probably as big around as the dollars themselves, not realizing that at that time I could take any silver certificate to the bank and demand the silver dollar for which it stood.

Mulling over my reaction to the dearth of silver in Las Vegas, I sought out a colleague who spent his childhood on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe. Growing up in a culture of legalized gambling, he said he considered slot machines a fact of life — ubiquitous and unremarkable. When I told him about the paper chits that I “won” in Las Vegas, his eyes blazed with a sudden remembrance. “Really?” he said, “when I was a kid, people walked from casino to casino carrying buckets of coins. I remember seeing them bent over to exaggerate the weight or clanking them to show they were either big winners or prepared to play all day.”

The image of people so burdened by their cash that it might be considered a trophy is absolutely contrary to today’s razor-thin and micro-light aesthetic. Only in the carnival environment of the State Fair are we apt to equate success with encumbrance. Recall those preposterously huge stuffed animals that the lucky winners at the shooting gallery or penny pitch are condemned to tote about for the duration of their day. By comparison to giant teddy bears and buckets of cash, rewards points accrued in Las Vegas are discreet like all our other financial transactions. A phantom electronic currency, the system of rewards gained, tabulated, and redeemed mimics our society’s all but total transition from a world where there were once concrete and verifiable forms of money, like silver certificates to a world where all that matters is virtual. Now that we have direct deposit and on-line banking, we need never go to the bank, much less carry cash. Consider the scant instances when only cash will suffice: the panhandler who asks “can you spare a dollar?;” the carpenter who gives a good rate for payment “under the table;” the man pushing a mower from block to block, who will cut the grass for

payment “on the spot.” Even McDonald’s and Starbucks are working to wean customers off cash with their pre-paid cards (which can be bought with the swipe of a credit card). Cash has become the currency of the marginal, the casual, the informal and illegal. It’s the medium of exchange for children too young to appropriate a parent’s credit card, and the Al Qaeda financier who transports loot by camel-back. These are the mythic last enclaves of a cash economy. Even the prostitutes, whose calling cards litter the streets in Las Vegas, advertize all credit cards accepted.

And why has currency become obsolete? According to writers for *The Economist* magazine, cash is just plain expensive. It costs more to print or mint many denominations of our bills and coins than the value they purport to represent. The production cost of a penny is certainly more than the 1¢ stamped on its backside. Then, there’s the cost of transfers. Think of those gas guzzling Brinks trucks required to haul our money around, not to mention all those employees needed to accept payments and make change. Why pay people, when a machine can scan the bar codes on our purchases, tabulate the total, and conclude the transaction by reading our debit card? Poof! The payment moves from one computerized system to another; and we, the happy shopper, go home with a car full of groceries.

Yes, electronic transfers keep the economic system well greased — goods and people choreographed in a transaction ballet where filthy lucre need never change hands. How odd that my supermarket now provides its shoppers with antibiotic handwipes. With everything so clean and efficient, we appear to inhabit the world depicted in the Visa Check Card commercial currently airing on TV. Here, life’s a big fast food restaurant. Burgers slide effortlessly off the grills and onto the customer’s trays. Drinks stream out of machines and into awaiting plastic cups. Workers and customers move about effortlessly, transcribing patterns that recall the wheels of a precisely functioning Swiss watch. Until — some loser arrives at the register and fumbles in his wallet for cash. All hell brakes loose as burgers, drinks, and people come to a jarring and messy halt. Cash is just not old fashioned; it’s a hindrance to orderly, efficient exchange. Only a Luddite disrupts the flow with cash.

And who would want to be a Luddite, when electronic transactions are so effortless? Indeed, they seem to make every purchase a gift — a gift that we give to ourselves. The magical moment of sliding our debit card seems to erase the fact of spending, just as the commodities that we buy erase all

trace of their ever having been made. The Barbie Dolls appear in their plastic bubble packages on the toy store shelf, as do the skinless, boneless, plastic-wrapped chickens in the refrigerated section of the supermarket. No one has plucked the chicken or dressed Barbie to hide her cyborg hips. No — they're all magical gifts. What connects commodity fetishism to the fetishizing of the transaction is distance and separation. Our perception of the commodity as a magically produced object corresponds with the removal of the work of production — first from our cities, as factories were displaced to anonymous suburban districts, then out of the heavily populated northern states to the more rural south; and now with globalization, to the far corners of the world (where only the rumor of sweatshop labor need ever challenge the commodity's pristine appearance). So, too, has the transaction been removed from our daily routines. Not too long ago, the work of consuming required monthly, if not weekly, trips to the bank; and payments for utilities and telephone service were made in person at the company's bills payable counter. Now, the fetishism that we once attributed solely to the commodity has permeated all the instances when we pay or receive money. The transaction, which was once a social act, has been removed into the virtual space of pay and debit points.

Once upon a time and shrouded in the lore of traditional anthropology, Marcel Mauss wrote a treatise on gifts and societies whose social economies were based solely on the giving, receiving, and re-giving of gifts. The model gifters were the Trobriand Islanders, who annually travelled from island to island to exchange their treasured objects — the sorts of things like head-dresses and necklaces that so captured my fancy in the Mayan temple. Because wealth circulated, no one individual could accumulate great power. Absent money, the gifts bound individuals to each other. What's more, each gift stood as a pledge of a future gift, thus preserving the past in an unbroken process of exchange.

Rewards are our society's shabby gifts. Rather than binding us to each other in a community of exchange, rewards block our relationships with others and bind us, instead, to the corporate entity that tabulates our points and bestows our rewards. Unlike the Trobrianders, whose wealth was held collectively, we know that real wealth is held — indeed hoarded — elsewhere; and then meagerly doled out to us according to a ratio of expenditures. Rather than gifters, we resemble anxious Cargo Cultists trapped in the suspended animation of our next anticipated reward.

I've long known the anticipation of a reward, because storing up points is nothing new. As a child, I collected my Mother's green stamps. It was my job to affix them in booklets, moistening their gluey backs with my tongue and pressing them — either singly or in sheets — to the page. One stamp per dollar spent, green stamps were the silver certificates of the redemption economy, as each one was the concrete and actual embodiment of money spent. So we saved our booklets for the hallowed day when we might take them to the redemption center — a veritable treasure trove of glistening home appliances: toasters, blenders, electric skillets. Like some bastard, god-forsaken Trobrianders, we would exchange our painstakingly saved booklets of stamps for an item — something my thrifty Mother would never buy, but something she truly coveted. Packed in its box, we'd take it home — a 3-speed Mixmaster. What a gift!

Thus, every spender is a saver. Every loser, a winner.

Back at the penny slots, I settled into a machine deep in the casino's forgotten recesses. I wanted a vantage point from which to gaze out and embrace as much of the playing floor as possible. I was alone — but for the woman mumbling into her cell phone from a position even more remote than my own. Surprised that she had service in this most bunkered enclave of the casino, I caught myself listening to snatches of her conversation.

"Did Bud tell you I won?"

"Yeah."

"On the penny slots."

At this point I was all ears, eager to get the story of another happy winner. Curiously, though, the winner seemed totally blasé. No ecstatic whoops; just dead-pan reality.

"Yeah — \$500."

"I thought Bud told you."

"Yeah, on the penny slots."

"So, where do you want to eat?"

Has winning become just another trivial detail in the day's events? If rewards buffer the grim reality of losing — do they not also cheat the win of its exceptionality? Playing the penny slots is no different than shopping — we spend to accumulate.