

On the feasibility of in-venue observations of EGM gamblers and game characteristics

Jason Landon^{1,2}, Katie Palmer du Preez¹, Maria Bellringer¹, Max Abbott¹, and Amanda Roberts³

1 Gambling and Addictions Research Centre, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, 2 Department of Psychology, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand, 3 School of Psychology, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, United Kingdom

Corresponding author:

Jason Landon

Department of Psychology

Faculty of Health & Environmental Sciences

Auckland University of Technology

90 Akoranga Drive, Northcote

Auckland 1142,

NEW ZEALAND

jason.landon@aut.ac.nz, +64 9 9219999 extension 7894.

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Abstract

Detailed observational studies of undisturbed gambler behaviour in venues are rare, especially if the focus is on continuous gambling such as electronic gaming machines (EGMs). EGMs are the main source of harmful gambling in New Zealand and all EGMs in New Zealand now include a mandatory pop-up message feature. The present study reports on 48 hours of in-situ observations of EGM gamblers in casino and non-casino (pub) venues in New Zealand and sought to establish whether relatively detailed observations of EGM features and gambler behaviour in venues were possible. Pop-up messages were the EGM feature focused on given their harm-minimisation potential, and the relative ease with which they can be observed. However, other EGM features were also documented along with descriptive accounts of associated gambler behaviour. The results establish that relatively detailed (quantitative or qualitative) observational data can be collected in venues using smart phones. The data showed pop-up messages were generally attended to but had little observable effect on gambler behaviour in venues. Direct in-situ observation of gamblers can provide ecologically valid information to compliment more common experimental and survey-based approaches. Some suggestions for developing the procedure are discussed.

Introduction

Reports of in-venue observations of gamblers are rare but varied in their approach (e.g., Aasved & Schaefer, 1995; Browne, Langham, Rockloff, Li, Donaldson, & Goodwin, 2014; Delfabbro, Osborn, Neville, Skelt, & McMillen, 2007; Fisher, 1993; Fong, Law & Lam, 2014; Fong, So, & Law, 2015; Griffiths, 1991; 2011; Parke & Griffiths, 2004). These variations have been in broad methodology (in the simplest sense quantitative and qualitative), dependent on the gambling activity of interest and the type of venue in question.

Certain forms of gambling lend themselves to relatively detailed reports of individual gambler behaviour given relatively slow-paced easily observable trial-by-trial outcomes. For example, Aasved and Schaefer (1995) shadowed pull-tab (a ticket-based analogue of electronic gaming machines [EGMs] in which combinations of symbols win prizes) players in Minnesota, USA and reported on the fundamental aspects of the activity, but also more detailed data on patterns of gambling of individual gamblers. The individual tickets inherent in that game made it suitable for detailed yet unobtrusive recording of betting patterns and game outcomes (see also Fong, et al., 2014; Fong, et al., 2015 for related detailed recordings of Cussec [a chance-based game in which gamblers bet on the outcomes of three dice being rolled] game outcomes from a Macau casino).

Fast-paced continuous forms of gambling such as EGMs present substantial challenges for making detailed observations linked to specific game characteristics. However, such observations are potentially important given the established links between EGM gambling and harm (e.g., Dowling, Smith, & Thomas, 2005). In New Zealand, the large majority of people seeking professional help for their gambling problems cite EGMs as the primary or only source of harmful gambling (Ministry of Health, 2016). Moreover, in a nationally representative study, of gamblers who had gambled on non-casino (pub) EGMs in the past year, 2.7% were problem gamblers (2.5% for casino-based EGMs) and 8.7% were

moderate-risk gamblers (9.1% for casino-based EGMs; Abbott, Bellringer, Garrett, Mundy-McPherson, 2014). In contrast, amongst the whole New Zealand population, 0.7% were problem gamblers, and 1.8% moderate-risk gamblers (Abbott et al., 2014). Behavioural tracking data can address some questions, but are not available in all jurisdictions – notably New Zealand where no widespread tracking system is available. Thus, direct observation is potentially useful in the absence of electronic data, and even given the presence of electronic data detailed observations could provide contextualised information on gambler behaviour.

Detailed spin-by-spin accounts of EGM gambler behaviour would be inherently difficult to record given the speed and complexity of EGM events (beyond electronically monitoring EGMs), and even more so should the observers' goal be to record undisturbed gambler behaviour. Nonetheless, a small number of studies focused on EGM gamblers in venues have been published. Some have involved qualitative (or mixed methods) reports of large numbers of gamblers in many venues, with a general aim of understanding the context of behaviour in those venues and/or describing the general characteristics of behaviour in venues (e.g., Fisher, 1993; Griffiths, 1991; 2011; Parke & Griffiths, 2004). As such, these studies have not involved close observation of the behaviour of individual gamblers in response to specific EGM events. For example, Griffiths (2011) reported an observational study in which he focused on three behavioural variables (ability, control, and time spent gambling) in over 1,000 hours of observations across a variety of venues. His goal was to identify and describe typologies of EGM gamblers. Based on observations of those three behavioural variables, Griffiths reported six types of gamblers in UK venues, they were: The Dedicated Professional; The Dedicated Impulsivist; The Dedicated Amateur; The Part-time Professional; The Part-time Impulsivist; and The Casual Amateur. Fisher (1993) reported similar work in an earlier observational study of adolescent gamblers in a single venue. Studies of that nature do not focus on individual EGM events and related gambler behaviour.

Other researchers have been unconcerned with reporting undisturbed gambler behaviour. Browne et al. (2014) reported a shadowing study of the effects of jackpots on EGM gamblers who were recruited in venues and observed with their full knowledge. Gamblers were asked to behave as they intended prior to enrolling in the study, and encouraged to “play for as long or as little as they liked, and to move to different machines or take breaks as they normally would” (p., 6). All participants received these instructions and, as such, the authors argued were equally affected. However, the nature of those effects was not quantifiable. Browne et al.’s intensive supplementary data collection and well-designed study meant they were able to establish relationships between EGM jackpots and gambler behaviour, albeit with the caveat that the behaviour was affected by the observation itself.

The observational approach taken in the present research most closely resembles that reported by Delfabbro et al. (2007) in their study aiming to identify problem gamblers in venues. Delfabbro et al. used an unstructured observational approach to describe the in-situ behaviour of gamblers. Observers entered venues as patrons and observed gamblers without disturbing any ongoing behaviour. Only upon exiting the venue did observers make notes on their observations (supplemented by any minimal notes they could make in the venue). From the perspective of their goal, they were able to confirm that many of the proposed signs of problem gambling were observable. In addition, they showed that it was possible for researchers to enter venues undetected and make undisturbed observations of gamblers often from the bar or a table in the bar. As with all observational data, there were limitations – in particular, in this case, the retrospective nature of the recordings, as observers made their notes on exiting the venues.

Delfabbro et al.’s (2007) approach provided retrospective descriptive accounts of gambler behaviour, but was not designed to examine the link between specific EGM events and gambler behaviour. In New Zealand, non-casino venues typically have gaming areas

separate from the main bar so sitting at the bar or a table and observing was not possible, and regardless more detailed observations would require being closer to the observed gambler than was needed in Delfabbro et al.'s study. To collect this level of detail, the observers would have to appear to be normal gamblers, and it was determined that notes could be made at relatively frequent intervals using smart-phone technology. The frequency of spins, and small wins meant that accurate counts of their occurrence and the behaviours associated with them would not be feasible. Also many such credit gains likely were losses disguised as wins where the gambler 'won' credit amounts that were smaller than the number of credits wagered on the spin. Thus, whilst descriptive accounts were made of spins and small wins, the focus was on documenting and recording all the less frequently occurring events and their associated behaviours, in particular the pop-up messages.

From October 1 2005, all new EGMs in New Zealand had to include a mandatory pop-up message feature, and by 1 July 2009 every EGM in every venue had to include the feature. The pop-up messages interrupt gambling at irregular intervals not exceeding 30 minutes of continuous gambling, rendering the EGM non-operational for at least 15 seconds, and presenting the gambler with information on their current gambling session (including time at the EGM and their current losses/wins). After 15 seconds, the gambler is given the option of continuing gambling or cashing out. Whilst empirical evidence on the effectiveness of pop-up messages, and the sophistication of the messages themselves has developed since their introduction in New Zealand (e.g., Blaszczynski, Gainsbury, & Karlov, 2014; Monaghan, 2008; Monaghan & Blaszczynski, 2010; Wohl, Gainsbury, Stewart & Sztainert, 2013), the early uptake in New Zealand means the intervention itself was informed by just two studies (Ladouceur & Sévigny, 2003; Shellink & Shrans, 2002). The frequency of occurrence of pop-up messages lent a confidence that all occurrences with respect to observed gamblers could be documented. Other relatively infrequent features such as

jackpots, free-spins, and bonus features were also recorded, while general descriptions of behaviours linked to small wins and losses disguised as wins were recorded.

Thus, the present study served two main purposes. First to ascertain whether relatively detailed in-venue observations could be undertaken without detection by patrons, and to establish the utility of those data. Second, given the New Zealand environment in which pop-up messages are compulsory on all EGMs, the second focus was on documenting behaviours observed in the context of their occurrence to contribute to the growing understanding of their impacts on gambler behaviour.

Method

Procedure

Two researchers each made 12 hours of observations in both casino and non-casino venues. Thus, a total of 48 hours of observations was made (24 hours in each venue type). The observations were spread across two casino and three non-casino venues. The fundamental premises for the study were twofold: 1) observations must be of undisturbed gambler behaviour; and, 2) privacy and respect for the gamblers and venue staff was of paramount importance. The study aimed to have no impact on the ongoing leisure and work activity of those in gambling venues.

For safety reasons, researchers entered venues in pairs and participated in gambling activities posing as regular patrons and engaging in venue-appropriate behaviours, whilst each observing different gamblers. They seated themselves at an EGM (the popular one or two cent machines in casinos, and two cent machines in non-casino venues) that afforded a clear view of other similar EGMs, and gambled minimum bets on a single line at a slow pace (a 'mini-min' approach). Observations were recorded a minimum of every 15 minutes (on average observations were made every 5 minutes) for as long as a gambler could reasonably

be observed (i.e. until they left the gambling area or could no longer be unobtrusively observed). Observations were noted in the venue on a smart phone email application, which outwardly appeared as normal patron behaviour (texting, checking email, internet browsing). Industry advisors suggested behaviour of this nature would not seem out of place.

Observation sessions were conducted at different times each day (including mornings [10.00 am - 12.00 noon], lunchtimes [12.00 noon - 2.00 pm], afternoons [3.00 pm -5.00 pm] and evenings [6.00 pm - 8.00 pm and 9.00 pm -12.00 midnight]) in both casino and non-casino venues. The researchers did not announce themselves or their purpose to other patrons, staff or venue management. However, venue security was aware that observations *could* be occurring. Once in the venue, a pragmatic approach was used to select the location from which observations would be made (i.e., field of view, number of observable EGMs) and the gamblers that would be observed (i.e., sometimes an existing session in which credits in EGM could be noted, and in other cases sessions would be observed from their beginning as the gambler occupied an observable EGM). Overall the stated goal was to observe a diverse array of gamblers in venues, but beyond that decisions were made by the researchers in venues as to the most appropriate locations and gamblers to observe.

The researchers were familiar with the main EGM features and pop-up messages, and made descriptive notes of the occurrence of observable EGM features and behaviours that followed them. Behaviours suggested by gamblers and venue staff to be specifically associated with pop-up messages (e.g. changing EGMs, redundant button pushing, cashing out [intentionally or unintentionally], texting/using phone, bathroom/cigarette or drinks break, watching others or looking away from their EGM, and summoning of venue staff – see also Landon, Palmer du Preez, Bellringer, Page, & Abbott 2015) were a focus; however, the protocol also stressed description of any observable or audible behaviours.

Throughout the study the researchers were never approached by venue staff or other patrons to question their activities. The only interaction with other patrons beyond a casual greeting was that on a few occasions gamblers offered advice on how to gamble more ‘effectively’ by wagering on more lines. As minimal interactions occurred with patrons, the researchers estimated their age, and ethnicities are not reported.

The data were entered into NVivo ver. 10 (QSR International, 2013) and coded for descriptive quantitative (identifying and counting behaviours observed) and qualitative (describing patterns of play in the context of EGM game characteristics, including pop-up messages) analysis. For presentation purposes, credit wins were coded for their size based on credits ‘won’, wins of up to 100 credits (on a 1 cent EGM up to \$1, on a 2 cent EGM up to \$2) were coded as small wins, wins between 100 and 400 credits (\$1 and \$4, or \$2 and \$8 on 1 and 2 cent EGMs respectively) were coded as medium wins, and wins of more than 400 credits were coded as large wins. The counts of specific events are supplemented with qualitative descriptions from the observer’s notes.

This research was approved by the authors’ institutional ethics committee (Approval number 11/302).

Results

Table 1 shows the gender and estimated age of the observed gamblers. The proportion of female gamblers observed in casinos was higher than in non-casino venues. The times at which observations were made were unrelated to the estimated age and gender distributions of observed gamblers, nor any discernible differences in the qualitative notes of gambler behaviours.

In casinos, 66 gamblers were observed. These observations were between 15 and 90 minutes each, with the median observation length being 30 minutes. In non-casino venues, 57 gamblers were observed, with the median length again being 30 minutes, and the

observations ranging between 15 and 135 minutes. No differences were evident in observation time with respect to gender or estimated age.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 shows the recorded observations of key EGM features in each venue type. The high frequency of small wins meant it was impossible to document all occurrences in this category together with associated behavioural responses. Thus, the actual numbers of small and medium wins are substantially under-represented in these data, but qualitative descriptions of behaviours following their occurrence were collected. In addition, the pace of gambling, and frequent cashing out and/ or reinserting smaller amounts of money made it difficult to accurately track gambler expenditure.

TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 also shows that pop-up messages occurred relatively infrequently compared to the readily observable free spins and large credit wins, and in the context of an almost constant stream of small and medium credit wins all of which occurred with accompanying ‘win’-related lights and sounds.

The majority of gamblers in both types of venues gambled on a single EGM, and the same game on that EGM during the periods in which they were observed. In casinos, 82% (54 of 66 observed gamblers) gambled on only one EGM during the observational period, and 86% (57 of 66) used only one of the games available on that EGM. These percentages were slightly lower among gamblers observed in non-casino venues, with 72% (41 of 57) of gamblers not changing EGM, and 61% (35 of 57) using only one of the available games.

When switching EGMs or games on an EGM was observed, the majority of switches occurred during periods without wins (72%), and most of the remainder immediately after a larger (400 credits or more) win (26%).

Whilst the main focus was on the occurrence of pop-up messages, behaviours in relation to other key features were also documented. The qualitative notes highlight the potential usefulness of this approach in contextualising gambler behaviour in response to key EGM features. Overall what was notable was an invariance in gambler behaviour in response to small wins (or losses disguised as wins) and other frequently occurring features – gamblers generally continued gambling in the same manner after these events. On the basis of the data at hand, two features of particular interest are ‘free spins’ and jackpots (or more specifically advertised jackpots nearing their limits). Free spins have been noted elsewhere (e.g., Blaszczynski, Sharpe, & Walker, 2001; Harrigan & Dixon, 2009; Harrigan, Dixon & Brown, 2015; Livingstone, Woolley, Zazryn, Bakacs, & Shami, 2008) as a key EGM feature and descriptive accounts of gambler behaviours here support that conclusion with gambler behaviour commonly suggesting enjoyment and/or relief at winning free spins.

Laughs with gambler next to her. Wins free spins, smiles, points to symbols she wants while games play. Wins \$10. Plays on... Gambler calls over to her from four machines away - “Got free spin put it up a bit higher [wager] and got it again!” “Tin bum” another calls out. All laugh. Female gambler, 60+, casino

Wins 20 free spins, turns, and says to no one in particular “thank god, that took forever!” Watches older lady next to her play, while her free spins roll, looks back at end of free spins to see last couple of spins and result. Female, 40s, casino.

Despite no ‘major’ jackpot being won, the possibility of winning one was evident in the discussions among gamblers in non-casino venues. In each non-casino venue only one

jackpot was available, and there were frequent discussions among gamblers especially when jackpots were nearing their limits and perceived as due to pay out.

“Are you keeping track on that? [indicating jackpot amount] we need to stay in for the jackpot - it’s up over 940 [dollars] tonight”. Female, 50s, non-casino.

In non-casino venues, the discussions and behaviour also often had a social or collegial element. Knowledge of the jackpot nearing its designated limit was shared with patrons in the bar, and it was common for bar patrons to visit the gaming area two or three times during their visit to the bar and insert \$20 into an EGM and wager the minimum amount on the maximum number of lines until no credits remained. This resulted in a gambling session of 15-30 minutes in length and was discussed as making sure one is ‘in to win’ the jackpot. Gamblers also shared their thoughts on how to win the jackpot with each other.

[Observed gambler to gambler next to him] “Money bags is the right game to win it”, he then chooses money bags game option. Male, 20s, non-casino

Different behaviours were evident in casinos where rows of EGMs were linked to the same jackpot. One approach observed as jackpots neared their limit was for gamblers to insert a small amount (often \$2) into one EGM and gamble one credit on the maximum lines until the credits reached zero. They would then move to each successive linked EGM and repeat this process until they had no coins remaining. Another strategy was group oriented, with a social group taking up an entire row of EGMs and each gambler gambling one credit per spin, usually on just one or two lines. This allowed them to gamble slowly over a long period of time and prevent others from using the EGMs linked to the jackpot. The groups were very sociable amongst themselves, talking and laughing, and one member would purchase food and drinks for the group to share.

Pop up messages were documented fewer times than other EGM features with the exception of jackpot wins (Table 2). Given their nature (i.e., the EGM screen is locked and unplayable), every pop-up message that occurred in the observation period was likely to have been documented and these data highlight the quantitative potential of this approach. Forty pop-up message occurrences (22 in casinos, 18 in non-casinos) were documented from 29 gamblers (18 in casinos, 11 in non-casinos). Most gamblers who had their gambling interrupted by a pop-up message had this occur only once during the period of observation. However, in casinos two gamblers were each observed receiving two pop-up messages, and one received three pop up messages. In non-casino venues this was similar, with two gamblers each receiving two pop-up messages, one receiving three, and one receiving four. Thus, these gamblers had gambled between a minimum of 1 and 2 hours continuously.

Table 3 shows the behaviours observed while the pop-up message was displayed. Two behaviours were predominant; in 15 of 40 cases the gamblers seemed to attend to and read the information on screen, and in 16 of 40 cases the gamblers looked away, watching other gamblers and their EGMs. In this small data set, it seems that gamblers in non-casino venues were more likely to read the information on screen. There were few signs of frustration (4 of 40 cases); in two cases, gamblers were observed hitting the spin button whilst the EGM was inoperable, and in two others verbalisations were noted indicating a frustration at possibly missing out on a jackpot.

[Pop-up message appears] Looks around, says to lady next to her “Waste of time this. Every time I want to play for the jackpot it blocks it!” Female, 60+, non-casino.

TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE

Data collected allowed for a descriptive account of the observable effects of pop-up messages on gambler behaviour. Table 4 shows the counts of behaviours observed following pop-up messages in both venue types. Judgements on changes in the rate or intensity of gambling were based on observations of wager amount and number of lines played. The dominant observed response, as with other EGM features was a continuation of gambling at the same rate. About half of all pop-up messages resulted in gamblers either waiting or pressing the ‘continue gambling’ response when it became available, and gambling in the same manner as prior to the pop-up message. A range of other behaviours was noted, with a small number of pop-up messages being followed by increased or reduced gambling intensity and, similarly, a small number of instances of gamblers cashing out, or changing games or EGMs.

TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

The present research was designed to observe in-situ gambler behaviour in response to pop-up messages and other key EGM features in casino and non-casino (pub) venues in New Zealand using a novel approach informed by previous research (Aasved & Schaefer, 1995; Browne, et al., 2014; Delfabbro, et al., 2007; Fisher, 1993; Griffiths, 1991; 2011; Parke & Griffiths, 2004). Pop-up messages were observed relatively frequently, along with other EGM features, and descriptions of the behaviours occurring with them recorded. The results showed that ecologically valid and relatively detailed data can be collected on EGM gambler behaviour in venues. Neither venue staff nor patrons raised any concerns about the researchers’ behaviour. This lack of detection confirms the feasibility of this approach in a

practical sense. Thus, demonstrating in principle that this simple approach to data collection could prove valuable for further direct observation studies in venues.

Given the New Zealand gambling environment, in which pop-up messages are mandatory on all EGMs, observations of gamblers' reactions to them were of particular interest. Forty instances were observed, and given the nature of the feature, these were gamblers who had been gambling for extended periods. The predominant behaviours were attending to the information on screen or watching other gamblers. Attending to the information was more common in non-casino venues in this study; however, further investigation is required to ascertain whether this is a meaningful difference between behaviours across venue types. The non-casino (pub) gaming areas tended to be separated from the drinking and more social aspects, largely enclosed spaces without music or bright lighting where solitary gambling is the norm with each gambler focused on their own screen, while in contrast, the casino gaming floor was a more open space. Whilst it is possible there are different norms in terms of behaviour across the venues, the researchers were actively watching other gamblers in both environments and their behaviour was not identified as abnormal or problematic. Perhaps more interesting are the reasons for not attending to the on-screen information – these could be gamblers that have habituated to the messages, or suffered more harm. It is relatively straightforward to monitor EGMs for pop-up messages (even from a distance pop-up messages are easily discernible given their size, central presentation, and because the EGM is inoperable), and if relatively subtle gambler responses are indicative of harmful gambling this is certainly useful information for host responsibility practice.

The data also suggest that following the pop-up message most gamblers tended to resume gambling at the same rate. Importantly, given the views sometimes expressed by gamblers and venue staff (Landon, et al., 2015), there was minimal observed evidence of

annoyance or frustration for gamblers. In the few instances where this occurred, it seemed that it was due to the timing of a pop-up message coinciding with the perception a jackpot was likely to pay out. Together, this is consistent with the notion that there is no substantial impact on gambler enjoyment of the pop-up messages (Palmer du Preez, Landon, Bellringer, Garrett, & Abbott, 2016). Nonetheless, irrespective of the context, where frustration in response to pop-up messages was evident, it could be an indication of likely harmful gambling and an opportunity for venue staff to interact with patrons as part of host responsibility.

Evidence supporting variations of pop-up messages as effective harm minimisation tools has developed since the design of the New Zealand intervention (e.g., Blaszczynski, et al., 2014; Monaghan, 2008; Monaghan & Blaszczynski, 2010; Wohl, et al., 2013), but regardless of their sophistication they indicate a gambler that has been gambling for an extended time, and those who report typically seeing three or more pop-up messages in a gambling session are more likely to be problem gamblers (Palmer du Preez et al., 2016). The pop-up messages provide an opportunity for vigilant venue staff to interact with patrons, and it would seem logical to suggest pop-up messages would be more effective if supplemented consistently with staff intervention (e.g., Delfabbro et al., 2007; Department of Internal Affairs, 2013; Griffiths, 2009; Productivity Commission, 2010; Tse, et al., 2005). Unfortunately, no evidence of venue staff interacting with patrons at an EGM was evident in the present study.

The present study establishes that detailed in-venue observations of gamblers are possible using readily available smart phones to collect data. Descriptive accounts of behaviour were combined with counts of specific events to highlight the possibilities of an expanded version of this approach. In future iterations, either approach could be used alone depending on the purpose of the research. There was no evidence to suggest that gambler

behaviour was affected in any way: Researchers were never approached by venue staff nor by other gamblers questioning their presence. The only interactions with gamblers were similar to those observed amongst other gamblers, or when gamblers noted the novice ‘mini-mini’ gambling pattern of the researchers, and provided advice on how to win by wagering on more lines on the EGM.

This approach can easily be replicated to focus on specific aspects of gambling products, or alternatively social or contextual aspects of gambling environments. A key gap remains in in-situ observations of gambler behaviour in response to EGM characteristics, which is only partially addressed in the present study. Given the feasibility has been established, larger studies could include more extensive periods of observation, confirm inter-rater reliability, and perhaps collect sufficient data to undertake quantitative analyses to more rigorously assess the differences suggested by the present data. With sufficient data it could be possible to quantitatively assess the effects that features such as pop-up messages have on behaviour, or determine whether specific EGM features are associated with increased gambling intensity in venues. With respect to EGMs, this could be done by simply selecting control periods of gambling separated by time periods mirroring the frequency of pop-up messages, or selecting specific EGM events unrelated to pop-up messages to serve as control events. With sufficient data, this approach could be broadened to a range of features.

While the method has many uses, it is not without limitations. As noted, EGM events occur at a pace at which manual recording of every event and every response is simply not possible. If access to electronic monitoring data is possible, these limitations can be overcome to an extent. However, if the aim is to document peripheral (non EGM recorded) behaviours in a given context, as it was here, electronic monitoring cannot address that. Thus, it seems more beneficial to focus on specific EGM events and collect more data on them (as outlined here with pop-up messages). At this stage, it is not clear what the

maximum event recording frequency is with this approach. It seems likely that observations every 5 minutes would be possible, but detection becomes more likely as the behaviour would be very patterned, and more easily discriminable from regular patrons. Moreover, collecting detailed descriptive data on the spot means that other relevant information could be missed. This can be minimised to a degree by having a clear focus via a detailed checklist with some pre-coded behaviours known to be associated with the EGM feature, and recording data, as far as possible, as the behaviours occur. Gathering data in multiple forms in order to understand gambler-EGM interactions and interactions occurring in the gambling environment in response to EGM events remains important, and in-situ observations of undisturbed gambler behaviour in venues is a potentially important component of this. Ecologically valid studies can complement well-controlled experimental studies, and retrospective surveys to add to the understanding of gambling and problem gambling on EGMs.

To conclude, the present research illustrates the utility of a covert observational approach to document in-venue behaviours as they occur. Detailed in-situ observations are clearly possible, and this approach could be used in a variety of gambling environments in which direct observational data would be useful to supplement current knowledge. A key harm-minimisation intervention in New Zealand, the pop-up message feature, had few observable impacts on behaviour in venues – but the messages were often attended to, and did not noticeably annoy gamblers. The variations in response to the pop-up messages require some clarification, but regardless it is clear that automated interventions of this nature provide an opportunity for venue staff interaction to support harm-minimisation efforts.

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Table 1. Estimated demographic characteristics of observed gamblers

Age (years)	Casino gamblers			Non-casino gamblers		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
20 - 29	5	5	10	7	3	10
30 - 39	0	9	9	4	6	10
40 - 49	7	7	14	6	4	10
50 - 59	1	6	7	4	5	9
60+	6	20	26	12	6	18
Total	19	47	66	33	24	57

Table 2. Documented observations of EGM features in casino and non-casino venues

EGM Feature	Casino instances	Non-casino instances
Jackpot won	0*	0*
Pop-up Message	22	18
Free Spins Won	70	66
Large Credit Win (400+ Credits)	66	76
Medium Credit Win (100-400 Credits)**	35	42
Small Credit Win (1-100 Credits)**	76	80

*Three “minor” jackpot wins (\$50-\$200) were observed – two in casinos and one in a non-casino venue

**These categories are substantially underestimated due to the pace of play and data collection method

Table 3. Behaviours observed while pop-up messages occurred by setting

Behaviour	Non-casino instances <i>n</i> (%)	Casino instances <i>n</i> (%)
Appears to read the information	10 (56%)	5 (23%)
Watches other gamblers and their machines	6 (33%)	10 (45%)
Shows frustration	2 (11%)	2 (9%)
Removes loyalty card	0	2 (9%)
Checks cell phone	0	2 (9%)
Leaves EGM momentarily while pop-up occurs	0	1 (5%)

Table 4. Behaviours observed following pop-up messages by setting.

Behaviour	Non-casino instances <i>n</i> (%)	Casino instances <i>n</i> (%)
Continues playing at same rate (credits/lines bet)	9 (50%)	12 (54%)
Increases credits bet	3 (17%)	2 (8%)
Cashes out	2 (11%)	2 (8%)
Changes machines or games	2 (11%)	1 (4%)
Inserts money into machine	1 (6%)	2 (8%)
Increases speed of play (spin button pushing)	1 (6%)	2 (8%)
Decreases speed of play (spin button pushing)	0	2 (8%)
Accesses Player Information Display (PID) screen	0	1 (4%)