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## From Antiquity to Australia: A Brief Account of Gambling

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Gambling has long been known as a form of addiction, the effects of which can be devastating for the individuals involved. However, it is also a pervasive cultural phenomenon that has been a fascination and a temptation for cultures from antiquity to the present. This paper begins with a historical account of the fascination with gambling and then proceeds to an account of gambling in Australia's history, as well as its current status in national and regional Australian society. Furthermore, a number of key features of gambling, which seem to be trans-historical and trans-cultural, will be discussed.

*Keywords:* Gambling; Addiction; Literature (Gambling); Australian perspectives; Games-of-chance.

### Introduction

Throughout time, games of chance and skill have fascinated people and inspired visions of instant success in life. Historically, the types of gambling have been many and varied. From around 3000 BC, Egyptian astragals, *primero* (one of the earliest card games of Europe), chariot races, gambling of wives or children, and dice-playing were popular forms of gambling, while horse and dog races were events reserved for royalty. The instinctual desire to take risks and ultimately master any given situation is reflected in gamblers today. While gambling is probably as old as mankind, systematic efforts at explaining it are of only recent origins.

### Accounts of Gambling

Games of chance and skill have been ascribed to the gods themselves. In Plutarch's story of Isis and Osiris (see [Ashton, 1968](#)), Mercury plays *tables* with the Moon to deliver the goddess Rhea from the curse of the Sun. Mercury, being in love with the goddess, wins the seventieth part of each of her illuminations. His win supposedly makes up the five extra days that were added to the original 360 days of the year.

Egyptian and Middle Eastern archaeological finds

have authenticated the historical accounts of the pervasiveness of gambling in ancient cultures. [Ashton \(1968\)](#) cites three games of skill that Egyptians played. These were *Tau* (the Game of Robbers), the Game of the Bowl, and *Draughts*. As evidence, Ashton reports the find of Queen Hatasu (c. 1600 BC), where a draught board and twenty pieces were recovered. Game boards and pieces have been found at the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur. Sir Leonard Woolley dated the finds from about 3000 to 2500 BC (see [Magnusson, 1985](#)). Ivory astragals (also known as *knuckle bones*) are the earliest known form of dice. According to [Dickerson \(1984\)](#), astragals existed at around 3000 BC, and were used to predict the future.

Gambling was an important aspect of the cultural and social life of the Roman Empire. The games of Ancient Rome ranged from the more solitary games to the highly organized community-based sports, such as chariot racing. This is evidenced in the various gambling tools that have been found in the Etruscan excavations, as well as those of Pompeii. The Talus, Astragals, Tessere, loaded dice, and gaming tables constitute some of the objects used for gambling. It is thought that Praetorians amused themselves with games of hazard. Lanciani, doing his excavations in the 1870s (cited in [Ashton, 1968](#)) identified six different games of hazard that involved varying degrees of chance and skill. A variation of the dice game that is reported to have been fashionable with Nero, the Roman emperor, is backgammon. The very young and the elderly citizens played other games such as Nuts and Mora ([Ashton,](#)

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1968). Several versions of these games are known to exist. It appears that initiation into the joys and sorrows of gambling occurred at an early age. Furthermore, a life-time of exposure to gambling failed to deter the elderly from play.

Gambling was not restricted to Egypt and the Middle East. China and Japan certainly had games of skill (see Ashton, 1968), which could have been used as betting events. The drawing of lots to determine outcomes appears to have been a widespread practice amongst the Jews. Often, the “casting of lots” (see Lev 16:8-9; Num 26:54-56; Lk 23:34; and Acts 1:26) has been interpreted as involving the use of dice. The Quran, while condemning gambling, also acknowledges the chance element (“you who believe, intoxicants and gambling ... and the games of chance ... you shall avoid them, that you may succeed. The devil wants to provoke animosity and hatred among you through intoxicants and gambling, and to distract you from remembering God”, Quran 5:90-91). It can be seen in these cultures that, by the dusk of antiquity, the elements of both chance and skill were securely embedded in the gamble. (The intrinsic recognition of the element of chance in gambling by this time is paradoxically confirmed by the emergence of the loaded dice used to reduce the element of chance, by cheating in play.) In all likelihood, the Egyptians, the Indians, the Chinese, and the Japanese were responsible for providing the skill element of play while the ancient Jews and Arabs supplied the dimension of chance.

Cards first made their European appearance in the 14th century in Italy. Variations in shape, size, and texture of the cards have occurred throughout the centuries. Their origin is thought to be Chinese, possibly during the Tang dynasty (Magnusson, 1985). In present day, the pack of 52 cards is of French design. Medieval Italy’s tarot card game consisted of 78 cards. Indian cards from the early 1500s were made up of 98 “circular, hand-painted and lacquered cards” (Magnusson, 1985, p. 362). British cards have depicted royalty, as well as providing moral, educational, and political messages for players. In the 20th century, Australian soldiers fighting in Vietnam chose card games as a relief from the horrors of war (see Charlton, 1987). This leisure aspect of card games has also been depicted in films such as *The Odd Angry Shot* (1979).

Casino gambling involves such games as roulette, dice, poker, baccarat, keno, and slot machines. Although the degree of skill involved differs for each game, outcomes are largely dependent on chance. The late 1940s saw casino ships being banned from the coasts of the United States. Prior to this outlawing, such gambling ships provided floating casino venues for players. The modern hotel-casino complexes no

longer just cater to players’ gambling needs—they have become major centres of recreation and entertainment.

The importance of gambling for the Australian way of life often comes to the forefront in many of the nation’s classic literary and historical works. Clarke’s (1975) colonial novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, uses the convict system and the fallibility of justice as background material to illustrate the suffering of human degradation. In moments of despair, convicts saw death as preferable to life under the convict system. Clarke (1975) provides a distressing example wherein three convicts who are no longer able to tolerate their incarceration draw lots made up of unequal lengths of straw to determine who should be the victim, the murderer, and the witness.

The drawer of the longest straw was the ‘lucky’ man. He was killed. The drawer of the next longest straw was the murderer. He was hanged. The unlucky one was the witness. He had, of course, an excellent chance of being hung also, but his doom was not so certain, and he therefore looked upon himself as unfortunate. (Clarke, 1975, p. 396)

In many other situations, and for many of the nation’s first inhabitants, the luck or misfortune of the draw was the determining factor in whether freedom or a tortuous survival would be their lot.

Australia’s early history can provide a number of examples wherein life itself was a gamble. Such was the case for James Morrill, a white man who is reputed to have lived amongst the Aboriginal tribe from the Townsville area for 17 years. James was a crew member of the barque “Peruvian” that left Sydney in February 1846 bound for China (Watson, Watson, & Watson, 1951). Of the 22 people on the boat, only seven survived the cyclonic conditions they encountered at Horseshoe Reef. Eventually, the survivors drifted into Cleveland Bay, which was to become the port of Townsville 18 years later. Watson et al. (1951) report that, as the survivors slowly died, the remaining five decided to “draw lots to see who should venture off in a desperate effort to secure food and assistance” (p. 4). Miller, the winner of the game, was found days later washed ashore. However, it is thought that Miller may have attracted the attention of the Aboriginals, who later befriended the remaining survivors.

Many of Frank Hardy’s (1965, 1972) works capture the social milieu of Australian gamblers. In the novel *The Four-Legged Lottery* one is told how the first settlers gambled with basic human needs.

From the very beginning, life was a gamble among the convicts and settlers. Our country was pioneered in the spirit of a gambler’s throw. The settlers, the squatters and later the shearers and drovers, who went into the hostile wilderness, gambled life itself on a bid to find success and security. Men

were thrown together without women and without culture, sport or entertainment—so they gambled. (cited in Inglis, 1985, p. 8)

This theme is continued in Australia's history with the gold-rushes of the mid 1800s. Historians, such as Manning Clark, have noted the "great madness, [the] all-consuming compulsion which saw sane and sober men, great pillars of respectability and probity, forsake their lives and their families and their jobs in search of elusive golden riches" (Charlton, 1987, p. 73). It is the promise of a better, more comfortable existence that spurs individuals to take the gamble with life itself.

The possibility of a gamble being responsible for changing one's economic position in life has been a topic that has inspired several writers. Katharine Susannah Prichard, an eminent Australian writer who began her works on the human condition of life in the 1920s, also portrays the lure of the gamble, especially for those less-fortunate members of society. In one of her novels, she reports "two-up was a straight-out gamble. Fair enough; the fairest gambling game he knew. It offered the poor man the chance of winning quids. That was its attraction." (Charlton, 1987, p. 258). Carey (1988), in *Oscar and Lucinda*, meticulously describes Stratton's wager of his family's whole financial foundation on Oscar's racing system.

And yet here he was on the way to the racecourse where he would throw their fortune into the maws of the bookmakers' bags. He believed the evening would see them wealthy, and yet he did not believe it sufficiently, ... He could not bring himself to look at what was wrong. He must rush forward. He must not miss the pony trap. And if you saw his sweating lip, the angry stare in his eye, you would know that this was a man who had already decided to ruin himself and that only his wife, hurrying behind, with her body severely inclined from the vertical, still imagined that they might at last improve the financial conditions of their lives. (Carey, 1988, p. 335)

Gambling was not always an activity of the proletariat. Brennan's (1971) historical account of John Wren, the character on whom Hardy based his novel, *Power Without Glory*, addresses this issue. Specifically, Brennan recounts how a Parliamentary act relegated lotteries to the domain of illegality. However, games such as baccarat played by the wealthy gentry remained perfectly legal. The illegal gambling shops from the late-19th century originated as a form of demonstration against the prohibition by the poor. Wren was part of this movement.

Hardy's works capitalize on the effects that chance outcomes have upon the lives of ordinary people. In *It's Moments Like These*, the reader is told about the

impact of a lucky win on Sandy Mitchell's life during the depression.

No good ever came of a working man winning the lottery; he can't solve his problems that way. Take the time old Sandy Mitchell won first prize with the only ticket he ever bought in his life. The depression was at its height at the time ... Old Sandy didn't drink in our school ... In fact, until he won the lottery, he never had a friend in the world. (Hardy, 1972, p. 159)

While Hardy successfully manages to provide animation for such social sequences; he responsibly warns that "no good ever comes of a man winning" from such games of chance.

Hardy's warning continues to remain his central theme in *The Yarns of Billy Borker*. In this book, the reader is initiated into a series of comic yarns concerning the struggles of the working and lower middle-classes during the Depression. The elusive win by gambling on anything is seen as helping them make it through this disillusioning period. The ruinous social effects of gambling are alluded to in the habit-forming structure of gamblers.

Australians will buy a raffle ticket in anything. They got into the habit during the Depression. Buying raffle tickets is like going to church or drinking beer, once you get into the habit. (Hardy, 1965, p. 62)

Stivens (1953), in *The Gambling Ghost*, presents a tall story wherein luck and chance occurrence eventually and inevitably run out. Frying-pan's nightmare comes close to many a gambler's reality.

"You brought me luck but your own was out, Frying-pan," says the ghost in a apologetic voice. "I ought to have stopped when your hundred was gone but I reckoned I'd get it back." ...

"The truth, Frying-pan, is that you owe the coves six hundred quid. I'm awfully sorry, but there it is."

"Ghost," says Frying-pan, "you've given me a raw deal."

"You're right," says the ghost, "but the harm's done. You'll have to square off with the boys. How much sugar have you got?"

(Stivens, 1953, p. 62)

Clearly, Frying-pan's luck had run out on this occasion. The elusive win had remained exactly the one at large. The tactics chosen by the gambler in the aftermath of a bad bet often mark the beginning of a series of family- and work-related problems.

It has often been stated that Australians will gamble on anything. Hardy's works have certainly illustrated this theme. Charlton's (1987) book, *Two Flies Up a*



*Wall*, presents further colourful evidence highlighting this Australian passion for gambling on anything. He begins with gambling tales about the English Georgian society from which Australia's early settlers came and continues this historical walk to the mid-1980s. Of course, sometimes the gamble has had a positive outcome, as this First World War story attests: "...during the 1914-18 war, a Turkish airman flew over a two-up school in full swing. Looking down, and seeing the raised eyes to heaven and the earnest bowing to the ground, the airman thought it would be sacrilegious to bomb these devout men at their prayers." (Charlton, 1987, p. 258).

One of Australia's contemporary novelists, Peter Carey, has chosen gamblers as the main characters in his novel, *Oscar and Lucinda*. Oscar, the young English clergyman with a gambling predilection, is pitted against Lucinda, who becomes his lover and companion as she strives for her industrial Utopia. In Carey's description of Lucinda, the reader gains some insight into the pleasurable feelings that well up inside the gambler: "When she played cards she was not dull or angry. She laughed. She looked prettier. She could feel her own transformation. People smiled at her." (Carey, 1988, p. 161) It can be argued that it is this euphoric feeling that provides the positive reinforcement for the gambler's behaviour.

Even local histories point to the omnipresence of gambling in everyday Australian activities. For example, a story that circulates in the provincial city of Townsville (in Australia's north) appears to provide further evidence for the assertion that Australians gamble on anything: The yarn tells of a man named Sam Johnson who, in the early settlement days of Townsville, swam a horse and sulky across Ross Creek for a wager of two sovereigns (Watson et al., 1951, p. 28). Watson et al. (1951) report that the successful trip took one hour and twenty minutes. There are many such stories of Australians interrupting their everyday activities to engage in "bets" or other types of gambling behaviour.

Gambling has always been a visible component of Australian community life. Even though north-eastern Australia has several modern, luxurious gaming establishments, less glamorous gaming houses have existed in its past. Grimwade (1987), reporting on the historical site of Atherton's Chinatown, describes the town of the early 1900s as having "at least one gaming house" (p. 30). The Cairns of the turn-of-the-century was well-acquainted with gambling. Poker games often ended in vicious brawls. The Chinese community provided other forms of gambling, such as *fantan*, *geefar*, and *pakapu* lottery tickets. Jones (1976) reports that gambling was rife even amongst the children of the early settlers. Since 1986, Townsville has boasted a modern Nevada-style gaming house—the Sheraton-Breakwater Hotel Casino. Within ten years of this,

Cairns, a city to the north that has an International airport and is the major gateway to the Great Barrier Reef and to the hinterlands of the Atherton Tablelands, opened its doors to the Reef Hotel Casino.

## Conclusion

Gambling in its myriad forms has existed for centuries at all levels of cultures and societies. Despite its origins in antiquity, its presence is also evident in the formation of new world cultures. Gambling has been a significant part of Australia's history, and has been inscribed in its literature and legends. At both national and regional levels, it impacts significantly on contemporary Australian society and culture. Despite its trans-historical and cross-cultural occurrence, a number of common features emerge: Gamblers relish the elements of skill and chance; gambling can be a source of leisure and pleasure when it brings wealth; gambling can be a distraction in times of distress; and, alternatively, in its compulsive and addictive dimensions, gambling can lead to personal misfortune and suffering.

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