

Researchers delve into the Montreal Casino's "Vegas Nights" experience

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Interdisciplinary scholar Erin Lynch. Credit: Brendan Lynch

The sounds, the lights, the layout, even the smells of the Montreal Casino have all been carefully crafted to entice gamers inside, and to keep them there as long as possible.

This scenario is not unique to Montreal, of course. Casinos worldwide do the same. But a group of three researchers from Concordia's Centre for Sensory Studies recently completed a study that looks at how all the specific techniques the local casino uses to create a "sensuous" gambling experience affect the client.

The authors argue that their [ethnographic study](#) is among the first to explore how these sensory design techniques work together to shape the atmosphere of the casino.

The paper, published in the journal *The Senses and Society*, is a sensory ethnography of the Montreal Casino: a [field study](#) conducted with and through the senses. It paints a vivid picture of the casino experience during its "Vegas Nights" promotional events in September and October 2019. The researchers note details as minute as the additional bounce visitors get from extra-plush carpets to the labyrinthine layout of the slots section and difficult-to-find exits.

"In recent years there has been an explosion of experiential design in casinos, where what is being offered is not just an activity but an experience that appeals to the senses," says interdisciplinary scholar Erin Lynch, a senior fellow at the Centre for Sensory Studies and the paper's lead author.

"We wanted to take this relational and contextual approach and look at how the senses mix and mingle within the casino environment. We also investigated how various actors such as patrons and employees co-produce that atmosphere."

David Howes, a professor of anthropology and the co-director of the centre, and associate professor of sociology Martin French co-authored the study.

Embracing the experience

By conducting their study during the Casino's Vegas Nights, the authors witnessed first-hand the supercharged kitsch and fun that comes when the ordinary casino experience meets drag queens, magicians, sugary Vegas-style cocktails, an abundance of deep-fried food and more. It was a "buffet of over-the-top spectacles and sensations," they write.

"The Vegas Nights theme appeals to the bacchanalian, more-is-more aesthetic that comes from the actual Las Vegas, and it is also interesting as a theming exercise," Lynch explains. "Vegas pretends to be somewhere else all the time—Paris, Venice, Egypt. So, when in Vegas you are being somewhere that's pretending to be somewhere else. Vegas Nights at the Montreal Casino pushes this even further, being a copy of a copy."

Hazard play

The researchers also passed time at the Casino's Centre du hasard, its responsible gaming station. This government-mandated information kiosk is supposed to raise the curtains on certain aspects of gaming in order to demystify the experience and create awareness about the riskiness of gambling-related behaviour. While there are superficial similarities to the actual gaming areas, such as touchscreens and spinning wheels, the centre "feels clinical in nature," they write.

"As a source of information competing for visitor attention in a sea of in-your-face entertainment, the sedate aesthetics of the Centre du hasard feel distinctly out of place."

While their paper takes a critical look at some of gambling's hazards, the researchers also argue that the fun side of the [casino](#) experience needs to

be better understood.

Indeed while gambling studies have tended to focus on the pathologies of play, the "pleasurable experiences associated with gambling are understudied," according to French. "Industry has monopolized discourses of pleasure, and academics have abandoned this terrain. Our study, led by Erin, pulls us back into this terrain. It shows how social science can talk about pleasure in the context of gambling but also retain a critical edge."

More information: Erin Lynch et al, A touch of luck and a "real taste of Vegas": a sensory ethnography of the Montreal Casino, *The Senses and Society* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/17458927.2020.1773641](https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2020.1773641)

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