

Foxwoods: Pleasure in the "Absence" of Sin?

by Cameron Smith, '00

Fifty two miles from Providence, on Route 2 off Interstate 95 you will find a purple and turquoise glow in the middle of the Connecticut woods. On the Mashantucket Pequot reservation, the largest gambling casino in the world —Foxwoods, sits nestled among massive, old growth trees and modest hills. Route 2 cuts a straight shot through the woods. An endless row of headlights returning from the casino illuminates both sides of the rural, two-lane road, and a string of brake lights guide the way towards a land run by rules of luck, addiction, and money. A tour bus returning to New York lights up a hand-laid, New England stone wall. In its disrepair, the wall no longer marks the boundaries of a proud property, tilled and worked with Protestant resolve. The decrepit mass of stones stands as a sadly antiqued relic on either side of a yellow brick road towards a fantasy world of elusive profits and dreams backed only by chance.

The pastoral vision of a Puritan New England, with stone walls and white clapboard houses, frames an approach to the self-contained complex of mammoth buildings. They rise above the tree line and cast an umbrella of neon over an otherwise undeveloped and rural part of Connecticut. Residents of the three closest towns have complained that they can no longer see the stars due to the lights cast off from Foxwood's enormous towers. Last year, tour buses coming from New York, Hartford, Providence, and other points discharged 1.1 million gamers. The buses shuttle constantly along this paved artery between Foxwoods and Interstate 95, so you are never alone, and there is never darkness.

I asked a Yale student, 21-year-old Cory Anthony Lee whether he sees himself as a winner.

"A winner. There really are no winners. When, you like, when I go to a casino, I'm, you know, expecting to lose a certain amount of money. It's not like I'm expecting to win anything. It's like, this is the amount of money which I'm willing to give away this day when I go."

Despite feeling sure that any sense of fun comes with the certainty of financial loss, he says,

"It is fun, but it's a bad idea. But it's a bad idea that's very appealing. It's like when you go out and get really drunk. The next day you don't like it. You're like, I'm not going to do that again, but inevitably, you do."

The story of the success and rise of Foxwoods has been read by some as a much-deserved example of capitalist ingenuity and by some as a loophole in the American tax and affirmative action system that has unfavorably and greatly enriched Native Americans. Tribal gambling casinos and gaming halls make up around \$135 billion of the \$500 billion-a-year national gambling industry. The Mashantucket Pequot nation capitalized on its reservation's proximity to Boston and New York, and using late 1980s court cases that fortified notions of the sovereignty of reservations, they started a small bingo hall in the late 1980s. Their plans to build the first 40,000-square-foot section of what is now a 314,000-square-foot Goliath were held up for lack of funding. Wall Street investment houses shied away from what was seen as a financial uncertainty and a political minefield. This was, after all, the reincarnation of the Vegas strip and the seedy board walks of Atlantic City in the pristine Connecticut woods, or so Wall Street thought. In 1990, finally having found high-interest financing from Malaysian casino owners, the Pequots started building Foxwoods and opened it to the public in 1992. The Pequots stifled a Connecticut State court challenge and opposition by promising the state \$100 million in revenue a year, or 25% of total slot machine revenue. With more than 5,800 slot machines, which generate around \$60 million a month, the treasury of the state of Connecticut is very pleased.

Gambling used to be an invitation to excess and sin. Gamblers, seen to have some connection to crime, the Mafia, or shady means of income, would drink, chase women, and waste their questionable money away in the casinos. Now gambling for some Native American tribes, who have gained acknowledgement of sovereign status from the federal Department of the Interior, is a road toward empowerment and riches. No more are casinos dens of sin; they are, rather, parlors of kitsch in pastel and neon. The dark demeanor of gamblers of myth and movies has found a watered down form in older, heavily permed women, clutching pink polyester handbags, making their way through a night or two a week one quarter at a time.

Casinos are designed so you don't know where you are and you can't get out. Slot machines ordered in random rows, the rare exit signs, and a continuous humming, ringing, spinning noise all work to disorient. Unmarked gaming rooms flow into each other at imprecise angles, and they all look alike. More than 5,800 slot machines, distributed through four gaming halls, fill each room with the hum and blur of white women with white hair absorbed in machines that seem to speak to them. They attach handbags to the slot machines, clipped to the end of a plastic chord, but some still clutch them with the desperation for stability's oasis in the midst of chaos. The ping-ping-ping of quarters dropped into metal containers fuses with the quick, violent pull on a lever that makes the wheels spin again.

Some gamblers play two machines at the same time, sitting between them, pushing buttons with the fluidity of expertise, desperation or both. For 25 cents, 50 cents, or a dollar, they become absorbed, forged in communion with a machine that flashes, buzzes, whirls, and promises more than it pays. Sierra, Silver, Double Diamond, Triple Diamond, Triple Triple Diamond, Red White Blue, Draw Poker, Fortune Hunter, Players Edge, KG Bird, Top Gear, these are the names of the machines to which they are bound, by focused absorption, and that plastic chord to their pocketbooks.

Habitual gamblers block out everything but the game. The anticipation and anxiety of feeling that you might win more than you put in, that a stream of quarters might at any second flow from your machine blocks out those around you. The promise of riches after minimal labor makes the buzz, noise, and people circling a peripheral distraction. Seated at the slots, between two gamblers, a woman punched quarters into the machine, and pulled its sleek lever. She played two

machines with a dexterity and speed of experience. A quick movement of her right hand would drop a quarter into the machine, push the "spin" button to set the wheels turning with a finger of that hand, on the way to placing another quarter, which had been tucked in her palm into the machine to her left. As she scooped for another two quarters from the big, white winnings bucket beneath her thighs, she'd press the "spin" button on the second machine with her left hand, and begin again.

Suddenly, lights flash, sirens announce her a winner, and a steady flow of quarters bring her circus of organized movement to a startled halt. She collects her quarters slowly, and begins again, now faster. Another woman begins to look over, her thin lips, and the tight, lined skin of a habitual smoker are frozen into a parsed message of jealousy for another's luck. Her eyes jump nervously with envy and fear that the grim reaper of chance has graced one winner and then cursed their row of slots. The first woman wins again. The jealous neighbor can't stop looking over, looking back to her machine, and looking again. Luck had visited someone so close to her, twice! A heightened aura of anticipation surrounded a machine other than hers. In a game of luck, which one never wins, all play on unequal platforms of chance.

For the 550 people who can claim Pequot ancestry, there are riches to be had in the excesses of suburban New England folk. And those riches are re-invested, in the Pequot River Shipworks to build high-speed ferries that shuttle gamblers from Long Island and New York, in land development, financial management, pharmaceutical ventures, and philanthropic donations. Foxwoods employs 12,000 people in an area that fell on hard economic times when defense contractors left the larger New London area. The casino has contributed over \$850 million to the state of Connecticut from slot machine revenue. The Pequot nation has proven itself to be not an economic sore or parasite on the side of Connecticut's economy, but a vital artery of seemingly endless cash.

The story of the Pequots is one of prominence, devastation, and resurrection. They have used their new-found wealth from the casino, not only to fuel for-profit investments, but to lavish philanthropic largess and gain political stature through \$974,625 in soft money donations between 1988 and 1996 to the Democratic and Republican parties. But the Pequot's most recent and unrestricted expenditure has been on a museum to enshrine their history and heritage.

The 308,000 square foot Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center opened in August of 1998 with a \$190 million price tag. It rivals the Holocaust Museum in Washington in sheer size, and any established national museum in funding and endowment. The Pequot story, which the museum aims to tell and represent, is recreated in an atmosphere of surreal completion. This is no Smithsonian mock up of an "Indian village" encased neatly behind the dirty glass of a never revitalized exhibit. The Pequot museum is alive with a faux wood-burning smell, life-size replicas of a Pequot village, and the latest technology to "transport" you to the experience of what it might have been. What the life of a Pequot might have been, has taken cruel and bizarre turns of fate since the 17th century.

Once a prominent and powerful New England nation, the Pequots lived around Mystic Connecticut, as did the Mohegans, now benefactors of the nearby Mohegan Sun casino. Soon after the Puritans landed in Plymouth in 1620, rising hostilities led to a war between colonists and Native Americans, leading to a series of violent conflicts for the Pequots that would reduce them in number to 66 by the 1910 census. Lurid tales of Pequots as devil-worshipping barbarians, who tortured, flayed, and roasted colonial captives fueled the Pequot war. The Pequot's losses allowed the colonists to settle the Connecticut coast, and left them in a vulnerable position for a massacre in 1637. During that year, British soldiers and allies set a fortified Pequot village afire, burning or spearing to death the majority of the tribe. This manifestation of the doctrine that would come to be known as Manifest Destiny spelled the near extinction of the Pequot nation. Now, though no full blooded Pequots remain, some 550 people trace their ancestry to the 66 Pequots named in the 1910 census. These 550 people benefit from the Foxwoods casino, and are ensured subsidized housing, full coverage of college tuition, and a voting stake in tribal affairs.

The museum uses technology to create a notion of the real, and includes a research and design division to recreate Pequot representations of artifacts based on estimations of the few that remain. Libraries, conservation labs, and staff fill the non-exhibition space. The museum aims for the massacre of 1637 to be viewed in all its gritty materiality. From the recreation of the Pequot village, filled with the smell of campfires, the tanning of leather, sounds of crows, smells, and movements which are generated in a never repeating pattern by a computer, the visitor descends to a red hardwood floor. Different statements from colonial settlers and Native Americans about the causes and representations of the massacre are written on the walls. Then a film, which parents are cautioned not to let young children see because of its violent content, brings the viewer from the massacre to the present. Mr. McBride, an archeologist and ethnohistorian, says of the exhibit that they tried for a more complicated view of the Native American role in what is often a simplistic drama of cowboys and Indians. " 'Lo, the poor natives' doesn't give them credit," he said. "I think the Pequots were aggressive. They were not completely faultless, nor were they passive victims. Nevertheless, the massacre was the massacre." A massacre which the Pequot museum has succeeded in enshrining.

The Pequot Museum's vivid and sometimes violent displays do not parallel a mythic, seedy world and violent scenes of the gambling casinos that financed its construction. Foxwoods has built a marketing strategy on a sterilized view of gambling, exempt of the "sins" of Vegas, it's go-go girls, shady players, and rough reality. The rise of gambling since the 1980s has coincided with its narrower focus on capitalist fantasies rather than desires of the flesh. State lotteries fund public schools. Easier and faster individual access to the stock market have made a Charles Schwab account akin to a quick game of poker, and lucrative public offerings of three-month-old getrichquick.com stocks encourage the public to anticipate the DOW and NASDAQ indexes as if they were fast growing adolescents. The stock market is fueled by an ethereal sense of consumer confidence, as much as a gambler pulling the slots is fueled by the basic awareness that it's all chance and luck.

Chance and luck, in the absence of sin, are enough to make Foxwoods fantastically profitable. The East Coast has its enclaves of a gambling industry associated with fast cars, desperate people, organized crime, and the consistent

hemorrhaging of savings accounts, paychecks, a school tuition. No Atlantic City, Foxwoods is fashioned on a disney-esque feel, and vague rumors of mob influence haven't tainted its marketing plans. Promising the "wonder of the Connecticut woods" in its advertising byline, this compound of a 23 story casino and its 314,000 square feet of mammoth buildings overshadow the outlying, proud, and pristine woods. The woods ironically become a theme park attraction, and the casino, which stakes its appeal on fantasies of luck and riches, maintains a purchase on the real.

Foxwoods' aesthetic absorbs and mystifies simultaneously; gamblers are enticed at the same time that they are conscious of the reality of their seduction. There's the convenience of access to New York, Boston, and points in between. You are promised the chance to win, and to win big. The vastness of the place and its circus of noise and light continue to fuel your trance. But, when the gambler is conscious of their seduction, and many are, where's the game? You know that at the end of the night this agent of seduction, who had whispered promises of pleasure and rewards, will leave you debased, unsatisfied, and yet wanting more. When the process of seduction is so clinical and scripted, how can it then be sexy? Possibly, we are in a moment of sanitized sexiness, where seduction is the stuff of the mundane.

Donna says, with the self-awareness of a regular, that she comes to Foxwoods all the time.

"We're nuts; we like to lose our money. It's fun."

"Do you always lose?" a visitor asks.

"She wins," Donna says, pointing to her friend Cathy, and "I've had some good luck, but I didn't have good luck tonight!"

"Do you feel like you're going to win next time?"

"I don't know. It's such an addiction. You don't really think you're going to win. But even when you lose you have a good time. It's different. If you were a psychiatrist, we'd like to talk to you more."

"Do you like it?"

"It's great if you win. Whatever I win, it'll always go back. The house always wins. If they don't get you this time, they'll get you the next time. It's only borrowed; they always get it back. It's a loan. It is. The house wins all the time. Otherwise they wouldn't be existing. So we'll walk out of here tonight saying 'this place is not going to see me for a long time.' We'll be back in two weeks."

And she laughs uproariously.

These gamblers who go to Foxwoods do not especially like Foxwoods. They are completely aware that they are going to lose money, that there's a certain amount of addiction involved, that the house always wins, and they're not going to strike it rich. But there isn't an awareness of what pleasure is in the gambling itself. Donna will tell you gambling is fun, but she can not tell you why. She can only tell you why it isn't fun, and that she'll be back soon.

The Gambling Grannies, a group of eight friends from Texas who travel to a different spot each year to gamble, told me not to gamble. Donna told me to save my money. Eric, an information booth attendant, told me to set a limit on how much I'd be willing to lose. Warnings from those who play at Foxwoods knowing they arrived already destined to lose ring hollow. Even the ATM cautions me, printed in black letters on brown plastic, hard to make out, but bestowing a kind therapy and counsel, "Do you have a problem? There's help. Call 1800-543-6546." And then for a \$4.25 withdrawal fee, this non-judgmental machine transfers my money from the abstract form of numbers at the bank into liquid cash.

I'm talking to Eric at the information desk. Eric cuts an imposing figure. His shaved head reflects different shades of fluorescence, the reds, turquoise, green, and blues that emanate from the faux Main Street facade on the other side of the hall. Disney's fantasia colors a mock-up of a small Midwestern town inside a building in Connecticut. His bulky frame leans across a flat and shiny ledge. I lean forward towards him because underneath the gravelly voice of a man who has worked in smoky gambling houses for 18 years, in Vegas and now Connecticut, there is a paternal sweetness which cautions.

"Set a certain amount, that you can afford to lose," he says. "Once you hit that amount, it's time to stop."

Everything about Foxwoods tells you not to stop, and cajoles you into never leaving. Eric's last count had the number of slot machines up to 5,850, with 293 gaming tables. An unchoreographed circus of motion flows through the rooms, around and above, in fast forward. To stand still in the middle of a room filled with thousands of slots, each producing their own sound and light and which totally absorb the player, feels like the breathless voyeurism of an awkward, static stance in the midst of a maelstrom.

Gamblers drop quarters, pull levers, and watch wheels spin over and again. Someone, somewhere in the room, wins big. You know someone is winning by the quarters, which constantly drop into containers, quarters clinking against rings, and each other as they fall into cupped palms, quarters sloshing like soup in super sized plastic cups. It's a circular sound that induces you to keep going. Cresting, high-pitched waves of noise always ends on the up, and vibrate through your body to make mush of the brain. You are filled with a sense of propulsion, repetition, a feeling of the inevitable. It's maddening, deafening, like that ringing in the ear when you're sick or have damaged your eardrum —both a persistent ring and buzz, but one which isolates you from any realm of normalcy. The noise distracts you from the impulse to stop at your limit. Cresting waves of winning, surrounded by the circular rhythms of machines on the edge of paying big, fill you with a sense of anticipation. Foxwoods studiously prods, cajoles, and seduces you into believing that you are always on the cusp of making it all back or winning more.