❖ Competing spaces: poker machines vs live music

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Introduction

The room inside the pub is dark and as thick with punters as it is with smoke. On one side of the room, an elevated platform forms a stage. Flashing lights silhouette animated band members whose music is delivered with pure passion to a crowd with unwavering attention, all bopping or swaying ceremoniously to the music.

On the other side of the room, divided by a sheet of frosted glass, a different type of light show is occurring, one filled with a whirring array of dollar signs, aces of spades and four leaf clovers. The punters stare with matched intensity at the small screens in front of them, their drive to win making them oblivious to the roaring of the crowd only metres away, enjoying the live music gig. The clanging of coins paying out of the machine two down is the only noise that dare distract the gaming punter from their task at hand. Breaking away from the experience only to quench their thirst, grab a breath of fresh air or a 'ciggie', both the music and gaming punter are quickly re-absorbed into the hypnotic, self-signifying spaces they inhabit indeterminably… by obsession or addiction?

Existing in parallel

Human beings absorb themselves in ceremonious pastimes that identify them as individuals or as members of a particular subculture. In the context of Sydney city, live music and gaming can be seen as existing in parallel. Sydney contains Australia's largest concentration of mainstream artistic and cultural institutions (SGS Economic & Planning, 2008: 227) and New South Wales, as a state, is also known as the world's poker machine Mecca. Due to such large conglomerates of people in both the creative sector and the gaming machine sector, both of these activities have impacted on Sydney's cultural life and the way in which spaces are negotiated and allocated for these competing practices. Is it obsession or addiction that connects punters of both live music and gaming to the subterranean spaces they inhabit? How does their behavior influence and affect these spaces? What is it about Sydney that incubates these environments and what impact do these two activities have on Sydney's current cultural life and impending future?

The tensions between the practices that occur in regards to these obsessions competing claims for space will be discussed in this paper. Firstly, however, it is important to establish the context that links these two pastimes together. Sydney's live music scene and the management of performance spaces has had a somewhat turbulent history, frequently marked by disputes between owners, local residents and councils over sound regulations and licensing laws. Venues

have also experienced an increase in competing revenue streams for publicans and changing patterns and preferences of consumer needs, resulting in a slump in demand for live music (Gibson & Homan, 2008: 68). Despite the range of factors that have contributed to the decline of live music in venues, one of the most commonly criticised and significant is the more profitable alternative, gaming machines. In spite of the rising replacement of live music in venues, the music cultures commitment to its passion has not been quashed and has resulted in the emergence of guerrilla and irregular venues within Sydney's underground music scene. This is illustrated by the owner of underground venue 505 in an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, stating that their venue transpired as a reaction to the fact that "there was a peak of commercialism, pokie machines were rife and bar takings were the most important thing" (Kaufman, 2009). This rivalry between gaming machines, the "coin gobbling opposition", and Australian live music is not a new phenomenon. Ever since their legal inception in Australian pubs/clubs in 1956 (Hing, 2002: 14), gaming machines have had a significant impact on how music is not only received, but delivered. In the 1960s "[poker machines] provided suburban clubs with sufficient profits to employ rock and roll acts, for many musicians there was a price to pay: they were required to perform cabaret, pop and older 'standards' in a style that did not distract the gambling/dining clientele." (Homan, 2008: 21). Despite the changing role and target demographic of gaming machines having shifted dramatically, their overwhelming presence is still a very real issue within Sydney's inner western suburbs pubs and clubs. Historically, gaming and the revenue created by it, subsidised live music, yet at a time when it was increasingly hard to sustain live music, particularly in pubs, governing bodies passed new acts of legislation in favour of gaming machines. In most cases, the revenue these machines create means that the complicated legislations and unstable revenue surrounding live music makes gaming machines not only a more profitable, but a more appealing and hassle free option for venue management and owners (Homan & Johnson, 2003:1). Due to the various convoluted factors impacting on the live music scene within Sydney's inner west it is important to consider, this essay is focusing on the relationship between gaming machines and live music. As the act of gambling and listening to or playing music is very different, it is not argued that they are directly competing pastimes but that they are merely impacting upon each other as they are competing for the venue space to undertake each particular activity. In this instance, commercial venue space is largely negotiated by profitability and punters' incessant interaction with, (and addiction to), each pastime and legislation biased towards gambling has resulted in gaming being more profitable and convenient than live music, driving music out of a large number of these spaces.

Despite Australia's commitment to the arts, there is no denying Australian culture's addiction to gambling. It is a devastating figure that as a country we gamble twice as much as the Europeans and Americans (Donnan, 1999: 1). Gambling has always been a part of Australian culture, "something done on the sly at the racetrack or behind the sheep shearing shed" (ibid). It is perhaps these illegal foundations that also support the negative impacts that gambling can have on one's life. Gambling has become a large part of a number of Australians' day-to-day lives, and although there has been a recent commitment to publicise and advertise the negatives associated with this action, the state government's role in supporting poker machine addiction should not be overlooked: after all, they were responsible for legalising gambling in the first place. While state governments can talk the talk of the subsidiary effects of gambling to claim community benefits like thousands of jobs and construction spending, these are elements that are easy to measure, lending themselves to impressive press coverage and easy indices of prosperity.

A much more complicated task is putting a price tag on the negative social costs linked to gambling. Due to more community awareness of the increasing risks and costs associated with gambling, research into these aspects has become more extensive. The 2010 *Productivity*

Commission Inquiry Report stated that in NSW in 2006, 5.6% of gamblers at moderate risk always/often bet more than they could afford, whilst a shocking, 57.7% of problem gamblers always/often bet more than they can afford (2010:187). Whilst the government has brought in a range of legislations to ease community dissatisfaction with the situation, the fact that 17.4% of all gamblers experience negative impacts on their life as a result of gambling suggests that there is room for further action and more extreme measures to be taken.

According to the NSW state government, playing the pokies is discretionary spending and the government revenue generated is a voluntary tax – but when does addiction make this spending non-discretionary and this tax involuntary? This functions on a similar axis as the non-discretionary tax associated with petrol, noticeably higher taxes are placed on cigarettes and poker machines, because they are justified as discretionary items, yet due to the addictive nature of cigarettes and gambling, it is arguable that for some, this spending/tax is not always optional. The government is benefitting from the monetary profit from poker machine taxes. Since the banning of smoking within pubs/clubs poker machine interaction and revenue has declined, so many venues have incorporated outdoor smoking areas which double as open-air pokie areas. In some cases, the only place a smoker can go to have a cigarette within a venue is within the confines of a row of poker machines, literally having to lean on or sit in front of a noisy, flashing machine to smoke their cigarette. Is this a genius ploy by the government, the enterprise of hotels and publicans to lump together Australians with addictive personalities … or is it merely coincidental?

Ultimately, this move to place poker machines in outdoor areas could be, in the long term, beneficial for the live music community as the renegotiation of space may make more room for live music areas. Yet, even if the space is made available within a venue, does a club or pub still predominately chocked with rows of looming poker machines positioned within unnaturally lit areas, lend itself to the kind of environment needed to express the rawness of a live music gig? As more venues embrace gaming machines and their profitable outcomes, there is a considered change in the atmosphere and environment within the venue.

In 2001 "the viability of inner city venues was highlighted by the Ministry of Arts' *Brackets & jam activity report,* which stated that, after several disrupted events at hotels, a decision was made to cease developing shows in venues where alcohol and gambling were the principal activities [which are] … less conducive to creativity" (Homan & Johnson, 2003: 7). This supports the notion that musicians are trying to extricate themselves from forming an association and bond with venues that are adopting poker machines as an integral feature within their establishments. Inadvertently in most cases, gaming's seductive lure and related social concerns about addiction is a driving force, behind either the reallocation of space within venues or the responsive act of musicians divorcing themselves from these once viable areas.

Here lies the direct link between the rise of poker machine presence and profitability within commercial venues and the emergence of underground and irregular venues. Due to a lack of supportive venues or the appropriate revenue being created within them, Sydney musicians, performers and grassroots community scenes have been forced to operate on a system of unofficial venues, many that exist without the relevant licenses and legislative approval. Within this collaborative and freeform underground scene, musicians and cultural diversity have flourished. A type of twilight zone has been created that offers musicians and punters not only flexibility, but also anonymity (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003: 211). This culture is consistent with any counter-cultural practice and movement that operates outside of normative and sanctioned cultural parameters. This particular guerilla culture rejects the normal conventional ideas consistent within commercial live music spaces and has subsequently opened underground, illegal, alternative, or what I call irregular, spaces.

A large majority of these spaces are hard to find, not easily identifiable and addresses are not printed online or on flyers. These venues are generally not purpose built spaces and consist of a range of warehouses and abandoned buildings within Sydney's inner west. If the venue becomes a lasting location it ceases to become the derelict building it once was and evolves into something new and profound in both a physical and social sense, transforming into a place. Alan Turley discusses this notion of place in *Urban Culture, Exploring Cities and Cultures* noting that we ascribe social meaning to places; they do not naturally have meaning. Turley explains that most often our sense of meaning is attributed to our experiences at these locations (Turley, 2005: 79).

An example of this creation of place within Western Sydney suburbs is the venue CAD Factory, situated on a small industrial dead end street in Marrickville. The roller door to this unkempt warehouse space is only opened to waist height and the area exposed is draped with a thick black curtain, which blankets not only the action inside but also the sound itself. The audiences at these gigs are there specifically to experience the music and the atmosphere: very different to that of a pub. The founders explain that the space exists to nurture ideas separating them from other venues, "The fact that within the murky creative spectrums of Sydney life, where most art school students these days are Design students who are caught in this terribly image-conscious existence and the music scene is a shallow trench where good people die like dogs and the evil creatures prosper. How lovely is it to know that a place like *The Cad* can exist simply for no other fact than to exist" (Cadfactory.com). This relaxed and unpretentious vibe is reflected in the clientele present at these gigs. There is no obvious or notable aesthetic or fashion trend linking this group of people; this culture is bound by a desire to create a sense of place. This does not necessarily refer to the physical space in a traditional sense but can exist simply in connection between people whose temporary association creates a provisional sense of place within already coded space (Tucker, 2009: 5). Whilst the inner design of eclectic paraphernalia, a mass of electrical cords and leads and a variety of vintage couches are notable, the physical location of the venue is also of importance.

Irregular venues such as the CAD Factory exist on the city outskirts, in quiet streets and industrial areas. Due to an absence of rules of discourse within this subculture, such a location displaces these individuals from mainstream values. It is also a direct attempt to avoid the public eye: for this guerilla culture, invisibility becomes an asset. These venues can be shut down quite easily due to a failure to meet specific guidelines such as not having fire safety plans and exits, a lack of wheelchair access and no official security guards. A number of these venues also allow or ignore the fact that punters bring along their own alcohol to gigs, often functioning in the same way a house party does. On top of noise complaints, it is this type of behavior and the lack of adherence to safety guidelines that contribute to residents in the surrounding areas alerting the council or police. As a result of this, this guerilla culture constantly hinge their movements on generating enough publicity to get people through the doors, but not enough to attract too much attention or noise. While it is easy to paint the council and policing forces surrounding the closures of these venues as the villains, it is important to note that due to the lack of funds within artist run spaces, occupational health and safety rules are not always met to the standards of the relative councils.

On a creative level, these free-form spaces initiate freedom of thought and expression, yet the dangers and social concerns affiliated with these venues operating on illegal pretenses should not be ignored. On one hand, it is important to note that the music punters' obsession has created something unique and celebrated but on the other hand the culture's inability to be commercially viable has sent these punters into unlawful and potentially unsafe spaces.

In 2008, a draft plan for *Sustainable Sydney 2030* was prepared with the input of a range of community and industry agencies by the *SGS Economic & Planning Board*. One component of

this document discusses the major challenge for global cities to ensure there are enough spaces or sites available to support low cost cultural organisations and emerging artists. The type of spaces identified as potential sites to house creative activities are old factories, warehouses and shop fronts that are either under utilised or awaiting development. What is interesting is that these proposals would continue what has already, in a sense, begun illegally. While it is a promising notion that the *City of Sydney* may acknowledge the need for artist run spaces, an in-depth study into the changes that may have occurred within these venues in the last two years would need to be conducted to clarify the nature and dimensions of the community value of legitimising these spaces.

It is a hard task to find a solution not only for these spaces but also for the loyal individuals that continue to keep the scene alive. Does Sydney need to embrace and push for more live music within their legal venues to stop these punters from operating on illegal pretenses? Or should, as suggested above, a more concerted effort be made by the government to facilitate and fund the creative outcomes that are happening in under-utilised venues on the outskirts of the city? This proves to be a difficult option within itself, as part of this culture's beauty and allure functions on a lack of discourse and rules. These venues are ever changing and evolving in nature: if rules are to be implemented, the government needs to be similarly dynamic in its approach. This has been noted by the local Marrickville council: "It's important that venues are safe, but it's also important that local councils work to find ways that enable live music and performance arts to grow in our community" (Marrickville Greens, 2010: 10).

Still, a single solution has not yet been found. There is fear within the community that this regulation will change what the subculture originally set out to do. This is not a new notion: the original punk movement dealt with similar issues, and by the late 70s, punk had largely become what it had originally riled against – that is, regulated, diluted and commercialised and divorced from the ethos that was central to the original movement (Catanzaro, 2004: 9).

How can anyone regulate, or make safe, that which is free-form, without stripping it of its creative atmosphere and outcomes? The only thing for certain is that this underground, artist-run scene is integral to Sydney's cultural DNA and needs to be kept alive. Yaron Hallis, owner of the recently closed illegal venue Qirkz told *The Sydney Morning Herald* in 2010, "I believe passionately that every city needs an underground scene because it affords musicians the opportunity to do very different things, it allows fringe musicians, musicians that are doing things that are cutting edge or that perhaps wont easily find a home in mainstream venues, to do their thing" (Corderoy, 2010).

Within the culturally diverse confines of Sydney city, these two particular pastimes need to negotiate a way to co-exist and decide if the cohabitation of venue space is a desired outcome. The way in which we go about finding this balance is still open for investigation and discovery. Sydney needs to address both the cultural benefits of the emerging underground music scene and the impact that poker machines have, not only on individuals within society, but also on Sydney's current cultural sphere and imminent future.

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