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## Images of gambling in film

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NT and BF carried out most of the raw research for the paper. NT with the help of MZ organized the material into themes. MZ helped revised the paper, expanded on the social context and corrected errors. NT wrote the final draft. BF handed over first authorship to NT in June 2004, just before he passed away.

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Nigel Turner (PhD, cognitive psychology, University of Western Ontario, 1995) wrote his dissertation on the psychology of figurative language. He has worked at the Addiction Research Division of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health for the past 10 years where he has developed psychometric tools to measure addiction processes. He is currently focused on understanding the mental processes related to gambling addiction. He has extensive experience in various research methods including psychometrics, surveys, experimental studies, computer simulations, interviews and focus groups.

Barry Fritz. This article is dedicated to the memory of Barry Fritz (1940–2004) (PhD, psychology, Yeshiva University, New York, NY) who passed away before he could finish this article. He was professor of psychology at Quinnipiac University, Hamden, Connecticut. He was a member of the board of the Connecticut Council on Problem Gambling. Barry wrote, "My current research interests are focused on understanding

the motivation to gamble and those factors that differentiate problem gamblers and recreational gamblers. I enjoy the game of poker and hope that my research will keep me on the recreational side of the table.”

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## Abstract

This article examines the depiction of gambling in recent films. Often gambling is portrayed either very positively or very negatively. The authors found eight overlapping themes represented in these movies: (1) pathological gambling, (2) the magical skill of the professional gambler, (3) miraculous wins as happy endings, (4) gamblers are suckers, (5) gamblers cheat, (6) gambling is run by organized crime, (7) the casino heist, and (8) gambling as a symbolic backdrop to the story. These themes suggest that the portrayal of gambling in movies has a number of interesting distortions. The discussion centres on how these distortions have an impact on efforts to accurately disseminate information about gambling to the general public.

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## Introduction

Gambling is the act of risking the loss of something of value (usually money) on an uncertain outcome in the hope of winning something of greater value (usually money). Gambling has often been a popular topic for myths, operas, books, songs, and in recent years, motion pictures. The current article examines images of gambling in motion pictures. The portrayal of gambling in movies is complex and shaped by social, historical, and cultural events and processes. While not all films that include images of gambling are ‘about’ gambling, many include characters that engage in some form of gambling activity.

Most people gamble as a means of entertainment. However, according to [Shaffer, Hall, and Vander Bilt, \(1999\)](#), between 1.35% and 1.85% of the population in North America develop a clinically significant gambling pathology. Pathological gambling (PG) is an addiction-like disorder. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) ([American Psychiatric Association, 2000](#)), lists PG as an impulse control disorder that is characterized by persistent and maladaptive gambling behaviours that have disruptive consequences on familial, occupational, and social pursuits. The availability of gambling has varied over time from

unrestricted gambling to prohibition and back again (see [Asbury, 1938](#); [Rose, 1986](#)). Over the past 20 years there has been a tremendous increase in the availability of gambling opportunities around the world ([Room, Turner, & Ialomiteanu, 1999](#); [Shaffer, Hall, & Vander Bilt, 1999](#)).

According to [Dement \(1999\)](#), the number of films that depict gambling has also varied over time. As shown in [Figure 1](#), between 1908 and 1930 only six films about gambling were produced. However, during the depression and again after the end of World War II, gambling became a popular subject in movies. In the past 10 years there appears to have been an increase in the number of gambling-related movies.

[Dement's \(1999\)](#) book, *Going for Broke* is a thorough examination of movies that depict pathological gambling. He examined a number of films in terms of the extent to which the portrayals delivered accurate and appropriate messages about problem gambling. Although some movies accurately portray the nature of pathological gambling at least during some segments, Dement found that many movies about pathological gambling had irresponsibly happy endings. Film images in some cases reflected societal views on gambling. However, images in films may also alter societal views of gambling ([Dement, 1999](#)). According to social learning theory ([Bandura, 1977](#)), people learn by observing the behaviour of other people and the outcomes of those behaviours. For example, it is commonly believed that images of smoking in films may have encouraged people to smoke ([Sargent, Dalton, Beach, Mott, Tickle, Aherns, & Heatherton, 2002](#)).

Social learning theory ([Bandura, 1977](#)) would suggest that this might also apply to media images of gambling (see also [Tremblay, Hoffman, & Drabman, 1998](#)). For example, irresponsibly happy endings in movies about pathological gambling could encourage problematic gambling. It is therefore important to examine the images of gambling presented in films to determine what distortions are present in recent movies.

Dement focused only on movies that were about problem and pathological gambling. Many films that depict gambling or have images of gambling that are not about pathological gambling per se. In this article we will extend Dement's work by looking more broadly at films about gambling. The purpose of this article is to examine gambling images in motion pictures and to find general themes that are common across a number of movies. We examine how gambling has been depicted in recent films, and explore the messages about gambling in these films. One key topic will be the exploration of misinformation about gambling.

Gambling is a well-established recreational activity and it is not surprising that it makes its way into movies. The first and second authors are recreational gamblers who play poker and enjoy watching movies about gambling. For balance, the third

author is a non-gambler for political, psychological, and personal reasons. In examining these films we are not trying to raise an alarm about the encroachment of gambling into our society, nor are we encouraging gambling in movies. Rather, it is our hope that understanding the depiction of gambling in films will assist us in mapping out the obstacles and opportunities that might be present along the road towards greater public awareness of the potential negative side effects of gambling.

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## Method

### Sample

Several hundred films were considered in the process of conducting this study. Sixty-five films were viewed and discussed in this article. The authors conducted a purposive sampling of films that had a focus on gambling. The purpose was to allow us to construct a complete understanding of gambling as seen in recent films. Most of the films listed here are relatively recent films produced within the past 20 years, but we have also listed a few older films that we felt were excellent exemplars of themes. The chart in [Figure 1](#) summarizes the release dates of the films reviewed in this article.

The first two authors are both avid enthusiasts of movies about gambling. Many of the films we discuss are personal favourites that we have watched several times (e.g., *Rounders*, *The Hustler*, *Vegas Vacation*, *The Godfather*). Some of the films reviewed in this article have been also discussed by [Gluss and Smith \(2002\)](#), [Dement \(1999\)](#), and [Hayano \(1982\)](#). Some films were included because they were found listed as gambling films in film catalogues or by Web searches for “gambling movies” (e.g., *Get Shorty*). Other films were suggested to us by recovering pathological gamblers, counsellors specializing in problem gambling, recreational gamblers, video rental store employees, and postings to the bulletin board of Gambling Issues International (a listserve for gambling treatment professionals). Our examination of movies was restricted to movies released in cinemas (i.e., not television), and filmed in English (with one exception, *Pig's Law*).

### Procedure

The authors conducted a purely exploratory study of gambling in movies. The only starting point in our exploration was [Dement's \(1999\)](#) discovery of irresponsible endings in films about pathological gambling. We started with this view, but wanted to look at gambling broadly defined, not just pathological gambling.

In all cases, either the first or second author viewed each film. In some cases both authors viewed the same film separately. The authors then discussed the themes that they thought were depicted in the film. The authors then collected the

descriptions of movies and organized them into general themes.

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## Results

[Dement \(1999\)](#) primarily focused his examination on the irresponsible messages in many films about pathological gambling. We took a different approach and instead extracted from these films several different themes. Following along from Dement's work, we first identified movies about pathological gambling. However, we also identified several other movies that focused more on the skill of the professional gambler. As a result we collected these together into a separate category of movies about professional or skilled gamblers. As we worked our way through this list of films, we uncovered two other themes: miraculous wins and negative stereotypes of gambling. Each time we added a movie to our list, we searched for additional themes that were emerging.

As the number of films increased, we realized that negative images of gambling could be further divided into themes of “cheating,” “suckers,” and “crime.” As more films were added, the crime theme was sub-divided into movies about crimes committed against a casino, and movies about criminals who run gambling operations. These seven categories thus completed our venture into the themes of gambling films.

However, we had an additional collection of titles that did not fit into these categories. These films made reference to gambling, but were not about gambling. We collected this last assortment of movies into an eighth theme: movies in which a gambling venue or gambling activity has a symbolic function in the story. These eight themes are not distinct but overlap. Several movies were related to more than one theme. Some of the films that we examined did not fit into any of the categories discussed in the article (e.g., *The Odd Couple*, *Guys and Dolls*). The rest of the Results section is made up of a list of themes with a description of the movies that illustrate each theme and detailed discussion of these themes.

### *Theme one: Pathological/problematic gambling*

[Dement \(1999\)](#) identified numerous films that depicted a pathological gambler. Many of these films included accurate portrayals of problematic gambling. However this accuracy was often undermined by irresponsibly happy endings.

- *Fever Pitch* (Fields & Brooks, 1985) is an accurate portrayal of pathological gambling, but the movie is severely undermined by a Hollywood happy ending.
- *The Gambler* (Chartoff, Winkler, & Reisz, 1974) is about a college professor and gambler who is so egotistical that he believes he can change reality by force of will. He is forced to fix a basketball game to pay off a gambling debt.

- *The Great Sinner* (Reinhardt & Siodmak, 1949) portrays a man who becomes addicted to gambling after his first spin of a roulette wheel.
- In *Let It Ride* (Giler & Pytka, 1989), the main character is a pathological gambler who experiences an amazing winning streak.
- In *Lost in America* (Katz & Brooks, 1985) a couple hits the road to “find themselves,” but the wife loses the family's nest egg of over \$100,000 at their first stop — Las Vegas.
- *Owning Mahowny* (Camon, Hamori, McLean, & Kwietniowski, 2003) is the true story of a Toronto banker who embezzles millions of dollars to support a gambling spree. At the end of the film, he is apprehended and goes to prison.
- *Pig's Law* (Bonin, Veillet, & Canuel, 2001) is the story of a young woman who steals drugs to pay her gambling debts. She is murdered as a result.
- *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas* (Spielberg, Cohen, & Levant, 2000) where Fred Flintstone becomes hooked on gambling and nearly loses everything—including Wilma.
- In *California Split* (Altman & Walsh, 1974), two gamblers go on a gambling spree and drinking binge.
- In *Vegas Vacation* (Weintraub & Kessler, 1997) a man sits down at a blackjack table and obsessively gambles away his life savings.
- *The Hustler* (Rossen, 1961) is about a showdown between two highly skilled pool players.
- *White Men Can't Jump* (Lester, Miller, Rappaport, & Shelton, 1992) is about men who try to make a living gambling and playing basketball. The main character is a skilled player, but addicted to gambling.
- *Two for the Money* (Cohen, Robinson, & Caruso, 2005) depicts the inner workings of a sport advice service. The owner appears to be addicted to everything that one can be addicted to including gambling.

Several movies have included characters who have a problem or who develop a gambling problem during the movie. However, few explore the reasons for the problem. *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas*, *Vegas Vacation*, and *Lost in America* show gambling problems developing rapidly. In most cases, no explanation of the development of the problem is given whatsoever. In *Owning Mahowny*, we see the experiences, temptations, and thoughts that explain Dan Mahowny's (Philip Hoffman's) gradual slide into greater and greater levels of embezzlement. However, the origin of Mahowny's gambling problem itself is completely unexplored. Similarly, *The Gambler* includes a few scenes in which Axel Freed (James Caan) justifies his irrational behaviour as a conscious exercise of free will and power. However, the development of the disorder per se is not explored.

*The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas* is one of the few movies that explore the motivations for problematic gambling. Fred Flintstone feels he needs to impress

Wilma because of her family's wealth. This is followed by a casino-manipulated series of wins (see [Turner, 2001](#), for a full review). The combination of emotional need and a series of wins (intermittent reinforcement) are a reasonably accurate explanation of problematic gambling. However, both Fred's addiction and his subsequent escape from gambling occur too easily.

[Dement \(1999\)](#) describes several films about gambling problem as irresponsible because they tack on a happy ending that leaves the viewer with the impression that the gambler can win it all back. *Fever Pitch*, *Let It Ride*, *Two for the Money*, and *Vegas Vacation* are particularly apt examples of films with irresponsible happy endings. *Owning Mahowny*, *The Gambler*, and *The Hustler* are probably the most “responsible” movies about problem gambling that we have seen.

Very few of these films ever show the gambler getting any help. In *The Gambler* and *Dinner Rush* (DiGiaimo, Greaney & Giraldi, 2000), another character encourages the pathological gambler to seek treatment, but nothing more. *Fever Pitch* (1985) shows a gambler attending a Gamblers Anonymous (GA) meeting. However, after the GA meeting, the main character goes back to gambling, has a lucky streak, and wins back just enough to pay off his \$89,000 debt. *Two for the Money* (Cohen, Robinson, & Caruso, 2005) has a brief episode in which the two main characters attend a GA meeting, but then try to drum up business for their sports advice service. *Owning Mahowny* (2003) shows Mahowny at the beginning and end of the movie talking to a therapist about how he will live without gambling. The movie does not show very much about the process of treatment, but the use of a treatment session to resolve the plot is a vast improvement compared to most movies in this group.

*The Hustler* and *White Men Can't Jump* are of interest because they explore problematic gambling in games of skill. Both illustrate how a highly skilled player can be a pathological gambler if he lacks emotional control. In *The Hustler* a contrast is drawn between Fast Eddie (Paul Newman) and Minnesota Fats (Jackie Gleason). Fast Eddie loses their first tournament together because of his over confidence and his drinking. He is emotionally crushed by the defeat. In contrast, when Minnesota Fats is defeated near the end of the movie, he graciously accepts defeat, shakes Fast Eddy's hand and goes on with his life. But Fast Eddy gets into a fight over the table fees and is barred from the games room.

*Theme two: The almost magical skill of the professional gambler*

However, not all movies about gambling are about problem or pathological gamblers. The second theme to emerge during our exploration of movies was the depiction of the almost magical skill of the gambler. This theme is most often related to skill games but the role of skill in these games is often exaggerated.

- In *The Cincinnati Kid*, (Ransohoff & Jewison, 1965) a young and highly skilled poker player (Steve McQueen) tries to prove to everyone that he is now the master of the game.
- *Maverick* (Davey & Donner, 1994) is about an extremely skilled gambler trying to get into a Winner Take All poker tournament.
- *Rounders* (Stillerman, Demme, & Dahl, 1998), is about a skilled poker player who has a nearly magical ability to figure out his opponents hand.
- In *Rain Man* (Johnson & Levinson, 1988) a man with autism is also mathematically gifted and is able to count cards flawlessly.
- James Bond films such as *Never Say Never Again* (Schwartzman, & Kershner 1983), *Diamonds are Forever* (Broccoli, Saltzman, & Hamilton, 1971), and *Thunderball* (McClory & Young, 1965), often have at least one episode where James Bond demonstrates a magical ability to win gambling games.
- *The Hustler* (1961) is a story about a pool hustler player who makes his living getting people to bet against his ability to sink impossible shots.
- *White Men Can't Jump* is a story about basketball hustlers. One of them is extraordinarily good at sinking 3-point shots, but cannot dunk.
- *Two for the Money* (Cohen, Robinson, & Caruso, 2005) depicts the career of a sport tout who is extraordinarily good at picking winners for the first half of the movie.

In a skill-oriented game such as poker, pool, basketball, horse racing, or sports betting, long-term success is theoretically possible. With the exception of some of the James Bond movies, these films illustrate play in skill games. However, the level of expertise is often highly exaggerated. In one scene in *Rounders*, Mike (Matt Damon) watches a group of professors playing poker for a few seconds, and then tells each of them exactly what they are holding. The main characters in *The Cincinnati Kid* and *Maverick* also show a magical ability to read their opponents' hands. In *Rain Man*, the autistic savant Raymond's (Dustin Hoffman) mathematical skill makes a blackjack game a sure victory. Card counting is indeed possible, but it only allows a card counter an edge of 1% or 2% over the house. *The Hustler* and *White Men Can't Jump* illustrate a magical ability to make impossible shots. Similarly, no matter what game James Bond plays, he is always able to win and prove that he deserves the designation of being lucky agent 007. He can even win games that he has never played before or games of pure chance such as craps (*Diamonds are Forever*). Bond films have been added to this category because these wins are portrayed as part of his overall secret agent skill. These movies glamorize professional gamblers and make skilled play seem like a sure thing.

### *Theme three: Miraculous wins as happy endings*

The wins discussed above were the result of skill. However, many movies end with



a miraculous win. [Dement \(1999\)](#) calls these sorts of films irresponsible because they encourage gamblers to hope to win.

- *Fever Pitch* (1985) is the story of a pathological gambler who goes on a spree and wins back the money he lost.
- In *Vegas Vacation* (1997), Clark Griswold (Chevy Chase) loses all of his family's money, but then is given a winning keno ticket from a dying man.
- In *Let It Ride* (1989) a chronic loser, Jay Trotter, (Richard Dreyfuss) has an incredible winning streak at the races. For one race, he picks a horse for the sole reason that none of his racetrack friends have picked it.
- In *Rounders* (1998), Mike wins the big showdown at the end of the movie and goes off to Las Vegas to live as professional player.
- In *Stealing Harvard* (Cavan & McCulloch, 2002), a young man needs money to pay for his niece's education. He unsuccessfully tries to steal the money, gives up, and instead wins the money he needs at a racetrack.
- In *The Good Thief* (Seaward, McLean, Wells, Woolley, & Jordan, 2003), Bob the gambler (Nick Nolte) manages to quit heroin, find love, pull off a major theft of a casino, and has an incredible lucky windfall at the casino.
- *The Cooler* (Furst, Pierce, & Kramer, 2003) tells the story of a person with chronic bad luck who works in a casino to "cool" the luck of winning players. His luck changes when he falls in love.
- In *Two for the Money*, after a disastrous losing streak, Brandon Lang (Matthew McConaughey) makes one last pick by flipping a coin. It wins.

The miraculous wins in these movies are often simply the usual Hollywood happy ending. People often go to movies for entertainment and escape so it is not surprising that they want a happy ending. The movie *Vegas Vacation*, for example, was a comedy and so the writers likely felt that they could not leave the Griswold family destitute. Additional irresponsible comedy was added by the contrast between the father (Chevy Chase) who lost virtually every time he played and his underage son (Ethan Embry) who won every time he played. Many comedies that have nothing to do with gambling have financially happy endings. *Stealing Harvard* is interesting in this respect because until the final scene the movie has nothing to do with gambling. Gambling is merely used as the means towards a happy ending.

However, the down side of the happy ending in films about gambling is that it may encourage distorted expectations about winning. Some viewers may take the magical ending seriously and be encouraged to chasing losses while gambling.

The main character in *The Cooler* (2003) suffers from contagious bad luck. The movie informs us that at one time he suffered from a gambling problem that resulted in a massive debt. The mob boss/casino owner had his legs damaged to punish him, but then employed him to kill the luck of other players. He walks

around the casino touching tables or merely walking by slots and bad luck happens to the players. However, this all changes when he becomes involved in a mutual love relationship and the opposite starts to happen—he develops a case of infectious good luck. At the end of the movie, he walks out of the casino with a huge sum of money. *The Cooler* is filled from end to end with superstition and erroneous beliefs. The movie gives the viewer the impression that without the cooler on staff, the casino would lose money.

The reification of luck is not unique to gambling movies. In the recent movie *Holes* (Blank, Davis, Medavoy, Tucker-Davies, & Davis, 2003), the main character Stanley Yelnats is cursed with bad luck because his great-grandfather forgot to honour a promise to a fortune teller. The main character unknowingly fulfills the promise to the fortune teller's great-grandchild, thereby lifting the curse and bringing on a streak of amazing good luck.

#### *Theme four: Gamblers are suckers*

There are a number of movies that portray highly negative images of gamblers.

- In *Casino* (De Fina & Scorsese, 1995), the casino's customers are shown as suckers, criminals, or degenerates.
- In *Croupier* (Cavendish, De Mardt, Olen, Ruppert, & Hodges, 2000), the main character and narrator seems to view all gamblers as addicts or cheats.
- *Mafia* (Badalato & Abrahams, 1998) is a parody of movies about organized crime such as *Casino*.
- In *Two for the Money* we are told that all the people who call the sports advice service are “hooked.” The character Brandon is told to “reel them in.”

Films in this category exhibit a negative attitude towards the ordinary gambler, often viewing all players as addicts. For example, in *Croupier*, the main character and narrator calls the casino the “house of addiction” and tells his girlfriend that gambling is about “not facing reality” and “ignoring the odds.” Later the narrator goes on to conclude that the gambler is not self-destructive, but rather wants “to destroy everyone else.” Similarly, in *Two for the Money*, Walter (Al Pacino) tells us that all of the customers of the sports advice service are addicts. This attitude is also echoed in an interview with the real person on whom the character Brandon is based. (This interview is provided on the DVD version of the film.)

In *Casino*, the key scenes that reveal the movie's attitude towards the players are those narrated by Sam “Ace” Rothstein (DeNiro), in which he describes the operation of the casino or the counting room. During these scenes, he makes a number of comments about the suckers who come to Las Vegas. He tells us that the casinos are “the only winners,” the players “don't stand a chance.” Later on, gamblers are described as dropping “junior's college fund into the poker slots.”

*Mafia* is a parody of *Casino*. It takes the negative view of gamblers one step further by explicitly making fun of the players. The slot machines come with names such as “Kiss your Money Good-bye,” “Last Red Cent,” and “Big Loser.” There is also a table game called “You Absolutely Can't Win” where the customers put their money on the table and the dealer takes the money, stuffs it in a hole and says “thank you for playing.” Another dealer uses a vacuum cleaner to remove bets from the table. The narrator goes on to say that “smart ones” just send the casino the money and save “the plane fare.”

#### *Theme five: Gamblers cheat*

Several movies show people cheating in order to win. In some movies the casino is also shown cheating, but more often it is the player.

- In *Rounders* (1998), Mike's friend Worm seems to be a pathological liar. No matter how often Mike tells him not to cheat, Worm keeps cheating.
- In *Cincinnati Kid* (1965), the dealer tries to help the main character by stacking the deck. The Cincinnati Kid refused to allow any cheating.
- In *House of Games* (Hausman & Mamet, 1987), a poker player talks a psychiatrist into helping him cheat.
- *The Sting* (Bill, Phillips, Phillips, Phillips & Hill, 1973) is centred around using a fake off-track betting parlour to lure a Mafia leader into a major con.
- In *Maverick* (1994), in the final hand at a poker table, the cards are stacked to draw all the players into the showdown for a huge pot of money.
- In *Lucky Numbers* (Daniel, Ephron, Krane, Lazar, & Ephron Resnick, 2000), three friends conspire to rig the lottery.
- *Eight Men Out* (Pillsbury, Sanford, & Sayles, 1988) focuses on the alleged fix of the 1919 World Series by gamblers.
- In *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas* (2000), Fred Flintstone is treated to an unusually long winning streak and then the casino owner throws a switch and Fred loses everything.
- In *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (Moore, Myers, Todd, Todd, & Roach, 1997), one of Dr. Evil's henchmen, Number Two, is playing blackjack with X-ray glasses so that he can read the next card in the deck.
- In *Waking Ned Devine* (Holmes, Murray, & Jones, 1998), two men discover the dead body of a friend who appears to have died of a heart attack upon winning a major lottery. They try to claim the prize.
- *The Cooler* (2003) shows a player, the main character's son, cheating at craps.
- *Shade Hammond*, Hartley, Schnepf, & Niemanm, 2003) is about a gang of poker hustlers who are anxious to prove that they are better at cheating than The Dean (Sylvester Stallone).

- *Croupier* (Cavendish, De Mardt, Olen, Ruppert, & Hodges, 1998) has several scenes of players or dealers cheating.
- In *Tombstone* (Jacks, Daniel, Misiorowski, & Cosmatos, 1993), Wyatt Earp moves a stack of chips, turns a card, and declares it a winner as an apparent bribe.
- In *Finder's Fee* (Arragon, Wallin, Williamson, & Probst, 2001), a man discovers a wallet containing a winning lottery ticket.
- *Rat Race* (Daniel, Zucker, & Zucker, 2001) depicts a race staged by a casino owner to give his high rollers something unique to bet on.
- In *The Grifters* (Scorsese, Harris, Painter & Frears, 1990), a con artist works for a bookie, placing bets to change the odds at the track.

According to these movies gamblers are dishonest people. *Finder's Fee*, for example, suggests that even honest nice people will cheat when the prize is large enough. *Rat Race* suggests that people will do anything whatsoever to win a prize. In *Austin Powers*, *The Sting*, and *Waking Ned Devine* the cheaters are successful and keep their wins. However, in *Rounders*, *Casino*, and *The Cooler* the cheaters are caught and dealt with rather harshly. In *Croupier*, cheaters were dealt with in a more legal manner being either barred from the casino or arrested. However, in *The Cincinnati Kid* and *Rounders* the main character refuses to win by cheating.

The casino also cheats in some movies. In four — *Viva Rock Vegas*, *The Sting*, *Croupier*, and *Tombstone* — the dealer cheats by letting someone win. In *The Sting*, *Viva Rock Vegas*, *Shade*, and *Maverick*, a win is used as a set up for a larger loss. In *The Cooler*, the casino employs a person with incredibly bad luck as a “cooler” to kill the luck of the tables. If such a thing as infectious bad luck actually existed then it would be cheating to employ a “cooler.” In *Viva Rock Vegas*, the casino owner flips a switch to cause Fred Flintstone to lose. Both of these movies use a gimmick to explain why players lose, when in reality all the casino actually needs to do is wait for the long-term house edge to come into play.

#### *Theme six: Organized crime runs the game*

The management of the casino is also portrayed in a negative light. Several movies draw a strong link between organized crime and casinos. While organized crime has definitely been involved in gambling in the past, this stereotype appears to be persisting.

- In *The Dinner Rush* (DiGiarmo, Greaney, & Giraldi, 2000), the owner of a restaurant is threatened by the Mafia over his son's gambling debts.
- *Casino* (1995) depicts gangster involvement in Las Vegas casinos. Casino operators are portrayed as criminals and degenerates.
- In *The Godfather* (Ruddy & Coppola, 1972) and *The Godfather II* (Coppola,

1974), the Mafia Corleone family runs casinos in Las Vegas and Cuba.

- In *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas* (2000), a rich criminal runs the casino.
- In *The Mask* (Engelman & Russell, 1994), gangsters run Edge City's hottest nightspot and casino, the Coco Bongo nightclub.
- *Mafia* (1998) is a spoof on Mafia movies such as *The Godfather* and *Casino*.
- *Get Shorty* (1995) is centred on a loveable “Shylock” played by John Travolta, in search of a gambler who owes him \$15,000.
- In *The Cooler* (2003) the casino is run according to the “old school” which means gangster style.
- *Bugsy* (Beatty, Johnson, & Levinson, 1991) is about the life of Benjamin “Bugsy” Siegel, who in the 1940s set up the Flamingo, the first major destination casino on the Las Vegas Strip.
- In *Walking Tall* (Briskin, & Karlson, 1973; Burke, Schiff, Foster, Amritraj, Hoberman, & Bray, 2004) a man returns home and finds that a corrupt casino owner controls his town. The casino uses loaded dice to cheat the players.

Gambling produces a lot of money and criminal involvement is not surprising. Movies such as *Casino*, *Bugsy*, and *The Godfather* series are based in part on actual events and are reasonably accurate portrayals of the historical link between gambling and organized crime ([Asbury, 1938](#); [de Champlain, 2004](#)). However, in our view modern Las Vegas defines itself in terms of a model of corporate greed rather than criminal greed. *Casino* is actually about the events that led up to the end of golden age of criminal greed. However, more recent movies about gambling such as *Shade* (2003), *Viva Rock Vegas* (2000), *The Cooler* (2003), *Walking Tall* (2004), and *Get Shorty* (1995) still draw a strong link between gambling and organized crime.

The link between gambling and criminals is also hinted at in many other films discussed in this article including James Bond movies, *The Hustler*, *The Cincinnati Kid*, *Rounders*, *Owning Mahowny*, *Shade*, and *Ocean's Eleven*. Curiously, the original version of *Ocean's Eleven* (Milestone, 1960), filmed in the heyday of mob-run gambling, did not depict the casino owners as criminals. But in the recent remake of *Ocean's Eleven* (Weintraub & Soderbergh, 2001) and its sequel, *Ocean's Twelve* (Weintraub & Soderbergh, 2004), the casino boss is portrayed as a ruthless gangster.

#### *Theme seven: Stealing from a casino*

Another popular genre of gambling-related film is the casino heist movie. This theme is closely linked to the “gamblers as cheaters” theme, but instead of stealing by cheating, the characters try to steal the casino's money directly. There have been several recent examples of films in this genre. These films often make the thieves seem glamorous and their theft seems justified.

- Both versions of *Ocean's Eleven* (Weintraub & Soderbergh, 2001; Milestone, 1960) are about a casino heist. The robbers are likeable and funny.
- *3000 Miles to Graceland* (Lichtenstein, Manes, Samaha, Spero, & Stevens, 2001) is about a casino heist by Elvis Presley impersonators.
- In *Croupier* (2000), the main character, who works in a casino, becomes involved in a plot to rob his own casino.
- *The Mask* (1994) contains all the stereotypes of crime and gambling. Dorian's gang of thieves robs a casino and attempts to blow it up with people still inside.
- *Lady Killers* (Ashley, Greenspun, & Preisler, 2004) follows the exploits of an eccentric group of criminals who successfully rob a riverboat casino.
- *Reindeer Games* (Moore, Weinstein, Katz, & Frankenheimer, 2000) is one of the few films set in a seedy casino. The casino owner is heavily armed.
- In *The Good Thief* (2003), a thief addicted to drugs and gambling successfully robs a Monte Carlo casino.

Movies that depict people trying to rob casinos do not seem to have any difficulty showing the thieves as heroes. It is as if the audience is being invited to feel some sort of satisfaction of vengeance against the casino. In *Ocean's Eleven* (2002), there is a strong hint that the casino operator is a criminal, so in trying to rob the casino the heroes are merely taking money back from the underworld. In *The Good Thief* the casino management is shown as being snobbish. In *The Good Thief* and in *Ocean's Eleven*, the crime does pay and the thieves are successful. The idea that casinos deserve to be robbed is most clearly stated in *Lady Killers* when Professor G.H. Dorr (Tom Hanks), tells his landlady that that there is no crime in robbing the casino because her “gains are ill gotten.”

The thieves in these films are not always heroic. *The Mask* depicts the thieves who plan to steal the “Orphan fund” as evil. In *3000 Miles to Graceland* Thomas J. Murphy (Kevin Costner) is a psychotic killer. However, another thief, Michael Zane (Kurt Russell) is heroic and manages to end up with love, a family, a boat, and a lot of money.

#### *Theme eight: Gambling as a symbolic backdrop to the story in the film*

This theme is different because it does not actually involve gambling per se, but the incidental appearance of gambling or gambling-related places in movies. Even movies directed towards children may have scenes of Las Vegas.

- *Looney Tunes Back in Action* (Abbate, DeFaria, Goldmann, Simon, Weinstein, & Dante, 2003) is an adventure involving Daffy Duck, a security guard, and a plot for world domination. The characters have to go to Las Vegas to obtain some special spy card from a nightclub performer.

- *Mars Attacks* (Franco & Burton, 1996). This movie is a comedic retelling of the *War of the Worlds*. Some scenes are set in Las Vegas.
- *Leaving Las Vegas* (Cazès, Stewart, & Figgis, 1995) is a movie set in Las Vegas, but gambling plays almost no role in the story. Rather the movie is about a man with alcoholism who is drinking himself to death.
- *Pay It Forward* (Abrams, Levy, Reuther, & Leder, 2000) is a movie about a boy who tries to make the world a better place with random acts of kindness. The boy's mother works in a casino as a waitress.
- In *Stealing Harvard* (2002), the financial salvation of the story comes from gambling.
- *Four Dogs Playing Poker* (Hoffman, Salinger, & Rachman, 1999) is a violent movie about art theft that uses poker as a metaphor for the intrigues of the plot.
- *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Cassavetti, Nabulsi, Nemeth, & Gilliam, 1998) is about two men on a self-destructive program of drug intoxication.
- *Snake Eyes* (De Palma, 1998) is a dramatic movie about a politically oriented crime. The movie is set in a casino in Atlantic City.
- *Shark Tale* (Damaschke, Healy, Segan, Bergeron, Jenson, & Letterman, 2004) Oscar owes \$5000 to his boss. His girlfriend gives him \$5000, but he bets it on a sea horse. This crisis leads Oscar into his role as (fake) shark killer.

The cameos of Las Vegas in movies are not particularly surprising given the city's claim of being the entertainment capital of the world, but what we find surprising is that even children's films such as *Looney Tunes Back in Action* (2003) would include Las Vegas. In the movies in this theme, gambling often serves a symbolic purpose. For example, in the *Looney Tunes* movie, Las Vegas is used as an allusion to the glamorous life of the international spy as depicted in James Bond films. In many of these films, the image of gambling is used to glamorize the film. The patrons are shown as well-dressed, affluent, and having fun. Poor or unhappy people are rarely seen in these movies.

*Leaving Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* depict the seedy side of Las Vegas. These two movies use “sin city” as a symbolic image of disappointed dreams and a hopeless future. In *Leaving Las Vegas* the selfish pursuit of pleasure has degenerated into a selfish pursuit of self-destruction. The end of *Fear and Loathing* is more of a realization of the futility of the dreams of the 60s counter culture.

*Snake Eyes* and *Four Dogs Playing Poker* use gambling as a metaphor for the high-risk games that the various characters are playing. Other films use gambling as a plot device to create a crisis (*Shark Tales*, *Viva Rock Vegas*), or a solution (*Stealing Harvard*). *Shark Tales* (2004) also uses Oscar's disastrous foray into

gambling as a metaphor for his short-sighted dreams of grandeur during which he ignores the fish that really loves him. *Pay it Forward* uses the randomness of gambling as a backdrop to Trevor McKinney's (Haley Joel Osment) attempt to make the world a better place through random acts of kindness. The symbolic meaning of gambling as used in these films varies from glamour to decadence, and from hope to hopelessness. What binds this assortment of films together into a theme is the use of gambling in a symbolic manner.

### **A taxonomy of themes**

As discussed above, we identified these themes by reviewing numerous films and summarizing their content. We have organized these themes into a general taxonomy of films that is presented in [Figure 2](#). First these films can be divided into two categories: films in which gambling is a central focus of the film, and others where gambling is a relatively minor topic but serves a symbolic role in the film. The films that are about gambling can be further divided into those that present generally negative views of gambling (e.g., pathology, crime, cheating) and those that present a generally positive image of gambling (e.g., magical skills and miraculous wins). The positive image is mainly related to the ability of the player to win (by skill or by miracle), but some of these films also add additional positive images by hinting at a glamorous and exciting lifestyle (*The Good Thief*, James Bond films, *Rounders*). Negative images of gambling are more common than positive images of gambling. Negative images were further divided into pathological gambling, suckers, cheaters, organized crime, and robbing casinos.

### **Release dates and trends in themes**

As a final analysis we also looked at the release dates to see if we could detect any trends in relative frequency of themes. [Table 1](#) summarizes the release dates of the films by thematic category. Overall, the two most common themes were cheating and organized crime. Movies about pathological gambling appear to be the most stable category of film, occurring at a steady rate throughout the past 40 years. The theme of magical skill appears to have declined. Out of the 17 movies released between 2001 and 2005, only one, *Two for the Money* (2005) could be said to show magical skill. In contrast, films with lucky endings have been quite common in recent years. Movies specifically about gambling and organized crime (e.g., *The Godfather* series) have declined somewhat in recent years (see exemplars in the section on Organized Crime). However, when we added to this list the number of movies that hint at organized crime (e.g., *Ocean's Eleven*, *The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas*, *Shade*, *Owning Mahowny*) then the numbers in this category show no sign of decreasing. The most noticeable trend is the number of recent films about a casino heist. The movies in this study were not sampled randomly nor were they sampled consistently across time. As a result we cannot draw any firm conclusion about trends over time in themes. [Table 1](#) is offered here



only as a guide to future research.

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## Discussion

As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this article is to examine the images of gambling found in motion pictures. It is our hope that an understanding the depiction of gambling in films will assist us in mapping out the obstacles and opportunities that might be present along the road towards greater public awareness of the potential negative side effects of gambling. In this article, we identified and described eight overlapping themes represented in movies about gambling. In summary these themes are as follows: (1) pathological gambling, (2) the magical skill of the professional gambler, (3) miraculous wins as happy endings, (4) gamblers are suckers, (5) gamblers cheat, (6) gambling is run by organized crime, (7) the casino heist, and (8) gambling as a symbolic backdrop to the story in the film. [Figure 2](#) organizes these themes into a taxonomy of film themes.

Throughout the history of movies, gambling-related stories have been present. Movies about gambling are most often inhabited by problem gamblers (e.g., *The Gambler*), cheats (e.g., *Shade*), criminals (e.g., *The Godfather*, *Ocean's Eleven*), spies (e.g., *Diamonds are Forever*), people with incredible luck (e.g., *Stealing Harvard*), and professional gamblers (e.g., *Rounders*, *The Hustler*). With the exception of *The Odd Couple* (1968), we have come across few movies that show ordinary people gambling in a non-problematic manner.

[Hayano \(1982\)](#) noted that movies set in the old west were often neutral about gambling (e.g., *Tombstone*, *Maverick*). The games were shown as part of ordinary life. In contrast he found that films set in cities included negative depictions of gambling, including a strong link with crime. Negative images of gambling still persist, but today, these are mixed in with images of incredible luck. It seems that when movie producers turn their attention to gambling, they insist on illustrating extremes. This is likely due to the pragmatics of telling an exciting story, but it leaves the audience with false stereotypes and erroneous images of gambling.

There appears to be ambivalence towards gambling in many of these films. On the one hand, gambling venues are shown as exciting and glamorous places where men dress in suits and women dress in evening gowns (*Ocean's Eleven*, *Rounders*, *The Good Thief*), and spies prove that they can beat the odds (*Diamonds are Forever*, *Austin Powers*, *Loony Tunes Back in Action*). On the other hand, many films suggest that casinos are run by criminals (*The Godfather*, *The Cooler*) or deserve to be robbed (*Ocean's Eleven*, *The Good Thief*, *3000 Miles to Graceland*, *The Lady Killers*). As another example, in *The Godfather*, Vito Corleone (Marlon Brando) tells us that gambling is just a “harmless vice” that people want,

whereas drugs are a “dirty business.” However, when Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) launches his new career as a legitimate businessman—a casino owner—he does so by organizing the simultaneous murder of all of his enemies.

Some movies provide important insights into the nature of pathological gambling (e.g., *The Gambler*, *Owning Mahowny*, *The Hustler*). However, others make light of the disorder or indulge in the wishful thinking common with pathological gamblers (e.g., *Let It Ride*, *The Cooler*, *Fever Pitch*, *The Good Thief*). In some movies people develop a problem too quickly (*Viva Rock Vegas*, *Lost in America*). Some films take the view that all gamblers are addicted (*Croupier*, *Two for the Money*). In *Guys and Dolls*, only one character, (Big Julie from Chicago, B.S. Pulley) seems to be a problem gambler. He risks a lot of money, chases his losses, gets angry over losses, cheats, and uses a gun to turn the game in his favour. However, the film depicts all of the gamblers as being in need of salvation. Most films about pathological gambling depict a narrow segment of the problem gambling population focusing on the male “action” gambler (see also [Griffiths, 2004](#)). Most pathological gamblers simply do not embezzle millions of dollars as in *Owning Mahowny* or take stupid risks just for the thrill of it as in *The Gambler*. Films rarely show gamblers hooked on slot machines or other electronic gambling machines even though such machines, where they are available, now account for a majority of problem gamblers in treatment ([Dorion & Nicki, 2001](#); Rush, Moxam Shaw, & Urbanoski, 2002; [Smith & Wynne, 2004](#)).

We have also found a number of errors in the depiction of games in these films. For example, in the film *Tombstone* there were several errors in the layout of the faro tables shown in the film and the manner in which the game was conducted (see [Howard, 2004](#)). Similarly the cheating by the casino in *Walking Tall* (1973, 2004) made no sense given the rules of craps. Because the players roll the dice and can bet on many possible outcomes, loaded dice would be an advantage to the player, not the house. In *Two for the Money*, the sports touts place an extraordinary emphasis on the outcome of single games. Real handicapping is a process of finding a small advantage across numerous games and playing the odds. Another error is the exaggeration of the power of skill in leading to a win. In *Rain Man*, for example, a man with autism is somehow able to learn to count cards in blackjack so well that he can predict virtually every hand. Finally, *Shade* was completely out of touch with the modern reality of high-stakes poker.

Some movies appear to be confused about the concepts of luck and skill. James Bond films frequently show Bond playing games of chance (baccarat and craps) as if they were games of skill. Whatever the game, Bond always has the skill to outplay his opponents. In contrast, *Let It Ride* portrays horse racing as if it was a game of pure random chance.

Many movies portray a distorted reality in which fantastic wins (e.g., *Let It Ride*,

*The Cooler*, *Fever Pitch*) or magical skills (*The Hustler*, *Rain Man*, *Rounders*, *Diamonds are Forever*) lead to success. Other films present a distorted image of how the casino makes money (*The Flintstones in Viva Rock Vegas*, *The Cooler*, *Walking Tall*). Fred Flintstone loses because the casino owner pulls a switch that sets the games from “win” to “lose.”

Similarly *The Cooler* suggests that the casino can only make it if it employs someone with bad luck to protect its profits. In many cases these distortions coincide with erroneous beliefs about beating the odds held by many pathological gamblers (see Ladouceur, & Walker, 1996; [Wagenaar, 1988](#)). Bandura (1977; 1986) has argued that people learn through the imitation of models. In this respect films with happy endings due to wins such as *Fever Pitch*, *The Cooler*, and *Vegas Vacation* might be teaching potentially harmful lessons about gambling. *Vegas Vacation* is particularly distributing because it shows a youth obtaining a fake identification card and then winning on every game he plays. Any message that one might gain by watching the father's (Chevy Chase) disastrous gambling is undermined by the success of his son (Ethan Embry).

[Gupta and Derevensky \(1997\)](#) have shown that children's attitudes towards gambling are shaped by parental modeling of gambling. They found that children often learn how to gamble from their families. However, little research has been conducted on youths to determine how they are influenced by movies about gambling. Kearny and Drabman (1992) studied how modeling affects the persistence of gambling behaviour in pre-school children. Children in their study who saw a model win took more risks in playing the game than those children who had observed a model lose. However, another similar study (Tremblay, Huffman, & Drabman, 1998) found that modeling of winning had no effect on persistence at a game. Research is needed on both youth and adult populations to determine how images of miraculous wins in movies affect people's expectations about gambling.

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## Summary

Movies present the audience with very distorted images of gambling. In addition they often fail to provide the audience with portrayals of responsible gambling. The film images of incredible luck are more likely to encourage irresponsible gambling. It could be argued that the purpose of a movie is to provide fantasy, rather than education. In addition, as works of art films have no obligation to be accurate. However, it is important to consider to what extent the producers and distributors of a film should be responsible for its content. It is likely that a film that encouraged excessive drug use or showed true happiness stemming from an addiction would at the very least come with a warning about its content. The U.S. rating for *Stealing Harvard* was PG-13 for crude and sexual humour, language, and drug references. There is no mention of the use of a miraculous win to resolve the plot.

This discussion of films has a number of limitations. The films discussed were neither a random sample, nor a comprehensive sample. We cannot generalize in terms of the relative frequency of the themes discussed. We have also limited ourselves for the most part to films shown in English, although Web searches identified several films that were not in English. In addition we have only superficially looked at the timeline of the movies we examined to see if there are trends in the themes or the number of films changing over time. A future direction of research would be to examine movies about gambling across time in a more comprehensive manner to see if there are indeed shifting trends in the themes in these movies.

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Lester, D.V., Miller, D., Rappaport, M. (Producers), & Shelton, R. (Director). (1992). *White men can't jump* [Motion picture]. United States: Twentieth Century Fox.

Lichtenstein, D., (Director & Producer) Manes, E., Samaha, E., Spero, R., Stevens, A., (Producers), (2001). *3000 miles to Graceland* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

McClory, K. (Producer), & Young, T., (Director). (1965). *Thunderball* [Motion picture]. United Kingdom/United States: United Artists.

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Moore, D., Myers, M. Todd, J., Todd, S. (Producers), & Roach, J. (Director). (1997). *Austin Powers: International man of mystery* [Motion picture]. United States: New Line Cinema.

Pillsbury, S. & Sanford, M. (Producers), & Sayles, J. (Director). (1988). *Eight men out.* [Motion picture]. United States: MGM.

Ransohoff, M. (Producer), & Jewison, N. (Director). (1965). *The Cincinnati kid* [Motion picture]. United States: MGM.

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Schwartzman, J. (Producer), & Kershner, I. (Director). (1983). *Never say never again* [Motion picture]. USA: Warner Bros.

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Seaward, T., McLean, S., Wells, J., and Woolley, S. (Producers), & Jordan, N. (Director). (2003). *The good thief* [Motion picture]. United States: Fox Searchlight Pictures.

Stillerman, J., Demme, T. (Producers), & Dahl, J. (Director). (1998). *Rounders* [Motion picture]. United States: Miramax Films.

Weintraub, J. (Producer), & Kessler, S. (Director). (1997). *Chevy Chase's Las Vegas vacation* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

Weintraub, J. (Producer), & Soderbergh, S. (director) (2001). *Ocean's eleven.* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

Weintraub, J. (producer), & Soderbergh, S. (director) (2004). *Ocean's twelve.* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Bros.

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## Figures

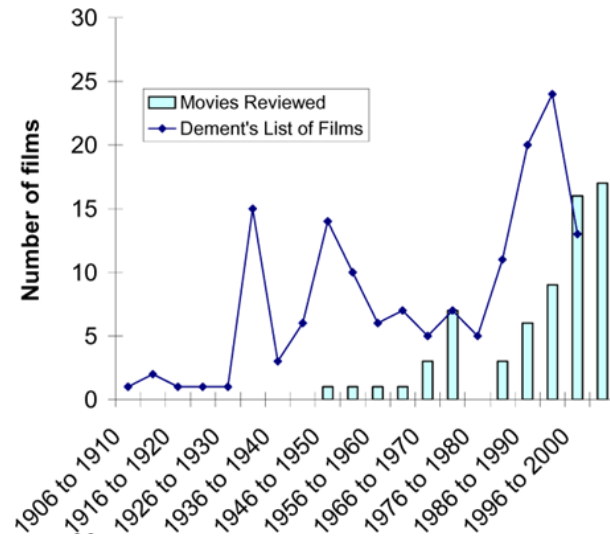


Figure 1.

Release dates for the movies reviewed in this article and for movies listed in [Dement \(1999\)](#).

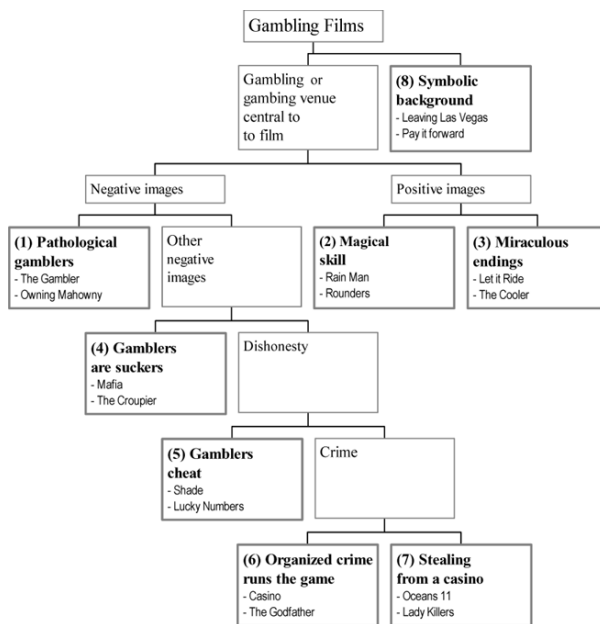


Figure 2.

Taxonomy of films about gambling with

exemplars for terminal categories. Note:  
**Bold titles indicate terminal categories**  
 with exemplars.

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## Tables

**Table 1**

Themes and release dates of movies

Theme	1946 to 1970	1971 to 1975	1976 to 1980	1981 to 1985	1986 to 1990	1991 to 1995	1996 to 2000	2001 to 2005	Totals
<b>Pathological gamblers</b>	1	2	---	2	1	1	2	3	12
<b>Magical skills</b>	3	1	---	1	1	2	1	1	10
<b>Miraculous endings</b>	---	---	---	1	1	1	2	4	9
<b>Gamblers are suckers</b>	---	---	---	---	---	1	2	1	4
<b>Gamblers cheat</b>	1	1	---	---	3	2	6	4	17
<b>Organized crime</b>	3	3	---	---	---	4	4	5	19
<b>Stealing from a casino</b>	1	---	---	---	---	1	2	4	8
<b>Symbolic background</b>	---	---	---	---	---	1	5	3	9

Note that several movies appear in more than one category.

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### Article Categories:

- research

### Keywords:

distorted images of gambling in films

,

movies about gamblers

,

exaggerated skill

,

misinformation

.

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