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## Walking Tall (2004)

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Nigel Turner, PhD, is a research scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) in Toronto. He received his doctorate in cognitive psychology at the University of Western Ontario (1995) and has worked for CAMH for the past nine years. He has extensive experience in quantitative research methods including psychometrics, surveys, experimental studies, and computer simulations. Nigel has received grants from the National Center for Responsible Gaming and the Ontario Problem Gambling Research Centre and funding from the Ontario Ministry of Health. He has published in peer-reviewed journals and has given a large number of conference presentations. He is particularly interested in cognitive models of problem gambling.

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Runtime: 87 minutes. Rating: PG-13 (parental guidance advised if under 13 in Ontario). Currently available on DVD and VHS, approx. cost: CND\$21. Production: United States: MGM; producers: J. Burke, P. Schiff, L. Foster, A. Amritraj, & D. Hoberman; director: K. Bray; starring Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson (TV wrestling star) as Chris Vaughn, Johnny Knoxville as the likeable deputy Ray Templeton, and Neal McDonough as the evil casino owner Jay Hamilton.

(The earlier version of this movie is also described in this review: *Walking Tall* (1973), runtime 125 minutes, rating: R (USA), currently available on DVD and VHS, approx. cost: CND\$14. Production: United States: Cinerama; producer: M. Briskin; director: P. Karlson.)

A note for readers: The goal of my movie reviews is to examine images of gambling in films to determine what these films tell us about gambling and the

gambling industry. I am particularly interested in examining distorted images of gambling. As such, my reviews often include “spoilers” that reveal details about the plot.

*Walking Tall* (2004) is a movie about vigilante violence directed against a casino. It is a remake of a highly successful 1973 movie of the same name ([Briskin & Karlson, 1973](#)) that spawned two sequels and a television series. In the original film, a professional wrestler returns home after a number of years away to find that his hometown is being run by criminals who have paid off the sheriff, politicians, and judges to overlook their operation of casinos, bars, houses of prostitution, and bootleg whisky distilleries. The film was based on true events in the life of Tennessee sheriff Buford Pusser (Joe Don Baker), who removed the corruption in his county with a big hickory club. In the 1973 film, he comes into conflict with these criminal forces when he is in a casino and notices that the dice shooter is cheating by using two sets of dice. He demands that the casino give money back to a friend. He is beaten up, stabbed, and left to die in a ravine. He survives, and once he recovers, he walks into the casino carrying a big stick, attacks the thugs who cut him, and demands money for his car, clothing, and doctor's bills from the cashier. He is then arrested for assault and robbery and stands trial, but is acquitted after showing the jury the scars left by the casino staff. He then runs for sheriff and proceeds to clean up the town while brandishing his big stick. After much violence, including the murder of Pauline Pusser (Buford Pusser's wife, played by Elizabeth Hartman), the movie ends with a bonfire as the good citizens of the county burn the craps tables.

Fast forward to the beginning of the 21st century, when casinos are licensed and run by businesspeople who offer entertainment services to their customers for a fee (a house edge). Such is the climate in which MGM decided to remake the classic movie. In the 2004 remake, Special Forces soldier Chris Vaughn returns home from a long tour of duty to find his hometown being run by a rich casino owner, Jay Hamilton. Jay Hamilton, despite his bleached blond hair, has apparently managed to secure an Indian gaming licence because he has some distant native ancestry. Initially, Hamilton and Vaughn are on good terms. Hamilton offers Vaughn a great night out at the casino with the full VIP treatment complete with alcohol, gambling, and strippers. But Vaughn comes into conflict with the casino when he discovers that the craps dealer is using loaded dice to cheat the craps players out of their money. He seizes the loaded dice and throws a winning roll and demands payment for his roll. The dealer refuses, a fight ensues, etc. Eventually, the security guards, by sheer force of numbers, overcome Vaughn. The casino security then cut and torture him and leave him for dead. He recovers, discovers that the casino guards are dealing drugs to kids, and smashes up the casino. As in the original film, he is arrested, charged, and acquitted after showing his scars. He then runs for sheriff and proceeds to clean up the town with a big stick.

The 2004 movie essentially serves as a vehicle for strongman action hero Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson to strut his stuff. However, it is interesting to compare the two movies. The movies follow similar story lines up to the point where the main character (Pusser, Vaughn) becomes sheriff; however, the original movie is much more violent because the criminals make several attempts on Pusser's life, and the film ends more in tragedy than in triumph. The violent treatment of the main character by the casino staff makes more sense in the original because the casino is a criminal operation. In the remake, the casino is licensed, so the staff could simply have had Vaughn arrested and charged with assault and property damage, and banned him for life. Cutting him with a knife makes no sense. In addition, the friend who is being cheated does not even seem all that concerned that he is being cheated. He's too busy trying to woo a woman at the table.

The cheating itself is not handled well in either film. In craps, a player is the shooter. The other players can bet with the shooter (passline or come), against the shooter (don't pass or don't come), or on a wide variety of other bets. There are so many different ways of playing craps that loaded dice would be more of an advantage to the players than to the casino.

There are many movies in which casinos are robbed (e.g., *Lady Killers*, [Ashley, Greenspun, & Preisler, 2004](#); *Oceans 11*, [Weintraub & Soderbergh, 2001](#)), but the two versions of *Walking Tall* (1973; 2005) are the only movies that I know of in which a casino is specifically attacked. The focus on the casino is actually stronger in the remake than in the original. In the 1973 original, Pusser enters the Lucky Spot Casino to attack the thugs who had previously cut him. He does not target the casino equipment per se. In the remake, Vaughn initiates his attack by smashing apart a slot machine. The scene of “The Rock” smashing slot machines and table games with a big stick nearly makes the film worth watching, but overall the movie is a disappointment.

Neither of the two films examines the consequences of gambling. In the original, Pusser's goal is to end the corruption and criminal exploitation of the people in his hometown. Gambling, alcohol, and prostitution are three aspects of a network of criminal activities that are exploiting the poor (especially the black population). However, the movie focuses mostly on Pusser's attempts to shut down illegal stills after several black people die from drinking unlicensed alcohol. Similarly, instead of exploring the problems associated with gambling, the remake focuses on illegal drugs that are apparently being sold by the casino security staff to children. However, exactly why a legal casino would sell drugs is never explained. The movie even acknowledges the absurdity of its own plot. In one scene, Sheriff Vaughn confronts Jay Hamilton, the casino owner, about the drugs. Hamilton asks him why he would jeopardize his casino licence by selling illegal drugs and goes on to note that a casino is a license to print money. And yet, sure enough, Sheriff

Vaughn finds Hamilton's drug factory during what is apparently an unwarranted search of the old lumber mill. Thus, the real problem with the casino as depicted in the 2004 movie is not the potential addictive nature of gambling but the sale of drugs to children.

The movie seems rather odd in that it brings up the social issues around casinos, but then misses all of the real problems with casinos and focuses instead on drugs. For example, the lumber mill that was the lifeblood of the community is closed and then a casino is opened. Instead of examining the economic, social, and commercial pressures that may drive a financially desperate community to open a casino ([Goodman, 2003](#)), the movie portrays the closing as being just another part of the evil of the film's arch villain (Hamilton). Once the casino is gone, the lumber mill is reopened.

In the original movie, gambling serves a crucial function of being the trigger that brings Pusser into conflict with organized crime. Once he is sheriff, the criminals essentially declare war on him. The problem for the remake is perhaps that since casino gambling is no longer a criminal operation, the evildoers have to be engaged in something else. How do you generate enough self-righteous anger against a legal pillar of the community to justify waving around a big stick? The answer: drugs. This is disappointing because the movie could have made some important points about the power that the gambling industry has today.

In writing this review, I sent it out to a number of colleagues for their feedback. One colleague thought perhaps the movie was making a moral comparison between gambling and drugs and that the two were “being given moral equivalence” and linked. Essentially, by tying gambling with drugs, the movie might stimulate a moral panic (cf. [Cohen, 2002](#)) that would focus negative feelings on the gaming industry. Another colleague felt that the movie was using casinos as a convenient metaphor for evil in a nonsensical way. Finally, a third colleague felt that the movie was “sidestepping” the issues of problem gambling, implicitly absolving the gaming business of any responsibility for the consequences of gambling in the context of this film. Essentially, the topic of drugs allows the movie to portray a casino owner as evil, without calling into question the morality of gambling per se. It would be interesting to see what message about gambling or casinos (if any) people walk away with from the film.

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