Christopher Croupier

A Never-Ending Performance

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Abstract

In this paper, I present my case for the idea of performance as being a part of everyday life and everyday experiences. Obviously, work is a prevalent theme throughout this project, as my primary focus relates to the various intangible aspects of work that seem to escape popularized notions of it as being nothing more than a job where one is confined to an obligatory separation of their personal life versus their work life. My experiences working in the gaming (read: gambling) industry is used as a model for my ideas and working analysis on work as life, and vice versa. As work becomes infused with personal life, where does one draw the line? How is it drawn? When? These are just a few of the many questions that arise in my analysis of what Professor Jim Henry—the proprietor and creator of this unique genre—effectively terms “worklife writing.”
The gaming industry in Las Vegas—and presumably the world-over—seems to be chock full of situations in which many of noted sociologist Erving Goffman’s key concepts might be applicable, primarily where his ideas of performance are concerned. In his *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman defines face-to-face interactions as “the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence.” Much like the prepackaged narratives promoted and elicited by academic universities, I noticed that players and service personnel in the gaming industry—servers, dealers, managers, cashiers, etc.—tend to shift to a generally limited set of roles, or, what I like to refer to as “molds” of different characters and/or behaviors that befit the situation at hand. One example might be a particular hand where all the players on a table have bet on the same side; this union of the players temporarily makes it an “us vs. them” situation. Because there is no player betting on one side, the dealer must open that hand, making themselves a participant in the game on the level of the players. The dealer essentially becomes a player—much in the same way that players might scowl or outright berate players that bet and win against them, the dealer also becomes a target of the players’ ire and frustration.

On the service personnel side of things, the dealer in the aforementioned situation must “adjust” his behavior accordingly with the players’ overt exclamations of “change the dealer,” or “you guys must be cheating,” but just enough so as to maintain the integrity of the game and the corporate entity behind the casino. Goffman comments on his idea of “work adjustment” in service occupations as it relates to impression management as follows: “Thus, the work adjustment of those in service occupations will often hinge upon a capacity that will require subtle aggressiveness on the part of the server when he is of lower socio-economic status than his client.” Going back to my dealer in the previous situation, a few important connections can be made with Goffman’s observations: a) every single dealer I know that has worked in the high-limit Baccarat room at the “V” hotel and casino, where I was previously employed, has been of lower socio-economic status than the majority of the clientele, b) taking too passive or too aggressive of a stance can have potential implications for your job at the
establishment, and c) adjustments must be made on the fly depending on the mood of the players on the table, which is influenced by how much they’re losing, how long they’ve been playing, etc.

Ultimately, the dealer is the controlling authority on the table, and a certain amount of respect is implied even before a player sits down at a table to play. The implied respect gives the dealer a great deal of control over the flow of the game, which can affect whether a player leaves the table—and, to a certain extent, the casino—satisfied or disappointed with their gaming experience. The members of service personnel who recognize the power and influence they have over a guest’s overall experience at the casino and hotel may exhibit different levels of what Goffman calls “belief in the part one is playing.”

When an individual plays a part, he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression fostered before them. They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. In line with this, there is the popular view that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show “for the benefit of other people.”

In my opinion, the more “belief” a dealer or manager has in the performance that he is giving to the “audience” on the tables, the more the audience will buy into the act. Given the situation, I knew exactly how players would react and how I would then counter that reaction to facilitate the smooth operation of the game. It is easier in the gaming industry compared to most other industries to foster a belief our clientele that we as dealers and managers are playing our parts to a T. Our performances are aided by the uniforms that we wear and the calm and professional demeanor that all dealers in the business are trained to exhibit. Thus, unlike retail salespeople or restaurant servers where business practices of the establishments that employ them tend to differ markedly across other establishments within the same industries, the gaming industry remains the most consistent in terms of putting on effective, consistent, and believable performances.
Post-graduation, 2003, I sat in a restaurant half-filled with members of my family and a few of my closest friends; it was a celebratory dinner, with everyone celebrating accordingly but me. My graduation cap lay quietly over my neatly folded gown on the chair next to me. Even though I had been sweating all day and the Korean restaurant we were celebrating in (well most of us anyway) required its patrons to cook ordered meats over a hot, charcoal-lit grill in the middle of the table, I was forced to keep a few lei on, “for taking pictures,” I remember my mom saying. I could see her sitting across of me, soaking up my moment of assumed success, singing my praises rather loudly between bites of food to my near-deaf grandmother sitting next to her and a few other half-listening relatives; it was her moment to shine, not mine.

The pressures I felt at the time were typical of many kids my age, I guess—study hard, get good grades, and shove off to the real world to get a job and be a productive member of society. According to my cultural background, however, “a job” was always equated to either the field of medicine or law; unfortunately, my mother was quite obsessed with the former. Everything in my early childhood was subsequently very controlled and structured because of this half-baked notion that I was destined to save lives (read: make oodles of money)—despite the fact that I wasn’t old enough to drive when Mommy had decided that this would be my destiny. It was no surprise that my college years and beyond were dedicated to breaking out of structures, systems, and all forms of control, whether it was sleeping in lecture classes, manipulating deadlines with tired excuses (my grandmother must have “gotten sick” or “died” on at least twenty separate occasions), or later on gambling to feel a semblance of control over my own life, which had spiraled wildly out of control.

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It was always weird having what felt like arbitrary expectations hovering over me like a swarm of bothersome and generally unwanted commands—instead of motivating me, they only served as hindrances and distractions. I mean, how is it even possible
that a plan as vague as “get an education, get a job” even remotely applies to every single individual in society? Chalk it up to immaturity or whatever you want, but I, for one, was not buying into any of it. I sensed then a bit about what I would later study in Martin Danahay’s “Professional Subjects: Prepackaging the Academic C.V.,” where he talks about the curriculum vitae—although, I think this can also relate to academics in general—as “[…] the narrative of a career [that] confirms the power of the university to elicit a prepackaged narrative in terms that ensure the reproduction of existing power relations within the institution” (352). I felt that the university that I graduated from promoted a “prepackaged narrative,” similar to how they elicit similar types of narratives from their prospective academic professional candidates. According to Danahay, the university is, after all, a business that breeds a “corporate culture” that protects the systems that have successfully served the universities’ own interests (351).

The narrative I internalized on my way toward becoming a wannabe doctor consisted of taking a bunch of science courses and other courses that I felt were unrelated to my field of study (I believe they’re called electives). Sitting there in the restaurant, I knew what everyone else didn’t: that I had barely graduated and had absolutely no chances of getting into any halfway-decent medical school in the country; I was a realist. I could see right through myself and a good number of my fellow graduates as well; that, despite having accomplished this “milestone” of sorts, we probably had no idea of what our collective futures had in store for us; then again, wasn’t life up to that point made up of nothing but achieving certain milestones? Let me think—kindergarten: learn how to play nice with others and listen to everything the teacher says; first grade to fifth grade: learn how to read, write spell, think somewhat critically, and produce music from a plastic flute; eighth grade: conquer middle school and leave it behind for high school; high school: start shaping the genius, well-rounded individual that ivy-league colleges are supposedly looking for; college: get in, get out, get a job; post-graduation: ….?

Relationships and expectations quickly soured in the months after my graduation feast. With the impending pressure to “do something” mounting inside, I channeled that energy into doing nothing but watch TV, play video games, and do everything but “get
out there” into the job market. I was partying like I thought I was supposed to after graduating from college. Only in the remote corners of my brain did the realization that I had really accomplished nothing begin to surface. Soon, the playing became fruitless and my life increasingly undefined as I quickly realized that I would somehow need to get away from it all, at least for a while, to see if I couldn’t somehow still enjoy life without having to throw it away for some boring career.

Some time after, a friend of mine living in Los Angeles called and told me about his wonderful life as a poker dealer on an Indian reservation just ten minutes away from the city. I remember his saying that he made around $3,500 a month dealing Texas Hold ‘Em. I was impressed, being that I knew my friend had less than half of the education I had. For the first time, I thought about using my accomplishments in education to help me take advantage of an actual job opportunity. Then amateur and current poker pro, Chris Moneymaker, had just become the first non-professional poker player to win the vaunted World Series of Poker, an annual poker tournament held in Las Vegas that attracted thousands of pros and amateurs alike from around the world. As the game’s popularity grew, so did the demand for dealers, setting off a massive boom in casinos around the country. After considerable objection from my parents, I hopped on a one-way flight to LAX, eager but nervous at the same time to contend with the prospect of entering a workforce completely different from my field of study; little did I know that decision would turn out to be one of the most defining moments of my young adult life.

Work=Getting Worked

The next few months of that year became a blur of poker, insomnia, alcohol, regret, and work. My first stint as a poker dealer at the well-known Bicycle Casino was short-lived as I dishearteningly realized that my income was nowhere near what I thought it would be. Dealers live and die off what they make in tokes, and for some reason, I never got much action in the shifts that I worked—I was lucky to take home $1800 a month. I also felt as if my job did not live up to the expectations that academia,
no doubt, had for a bright, young innovator such as myself. “A dealer?” I could hear the academic elite chortle. “You don’t need a degree to be that!” What’s worse, I started to gamble. If I worked the dayshift, you could probably see me gambling at nearby casinos through the swing shift; if I worked the swing shift, there I’d be in some casino at two in the morning, sitting and playing amongst card fiends and drunks. Such losers, I would think to myself, not realizing what I was becoming myself. But when you’re losing, the games start to appear to move slower than usual. As far as the wins are concerned, nobody really talks about them the way they like to talk about their losses. The selfish bitching and moaning started to become synonymous in my mind to what being a gambler was all about. Everything became “me, me, me,” so I didn’t really care that there were eight or nine other people sitting with me on the table. All I wanted was to get paid or be in a hand, hence the slow speed at which I felt the games were always running. Right around this time, I heard whispers of a supposedly quick and easy little game called Baccarat, where some of the losers from Hold ‘Em would jump on a table and supposedly recoup their losses effortlessly. If there is one thing that I have come to learn from working in the gaming industry, it’s this: there is no such thing as easy money. The word “effortlessly” is not a part of any remotely seasoned player’s vocabulary. It’s just too bad that I didn’t put it all together then.

After some pretty bad losing streaks, I had maxed out my credit at several casinos on the reservations and lost all the money I had saved up to that point in my life. Soon enough, I was toiling in the depths and slums of the gaming world with the friend who had introduced me to the business in the first place, going from one underground baccarat house to another, looking for someone—anyone—to extend just a few hundred dollars in markers. The underground gambling scene was vastly different from that of the Bicycle in that many of the dealers working at the different underground establishments spoke little to no English at all—the language of choice was usually Chinese or some other Asian language. Most of the time I was there, I would see dealers shouting and arguing with unruly customers, at which point large, skin-headed “security personnel” intervened and kicked/dragged/pulled customers out of the establishment. Back at the Bicycle, dealers were forbidden to get into any altercations.
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with the players, verbal or otherwise. We had to wear uniforms and represent the image of the corporation that employed us; we had to exude politeness and courtesy, smile when necessary, and lend an encouraging word or two when appropriate. The underground gambling houses seemed to be the exact opposite—dealers wore whatever they wanted, smoked while they dealt cards, laughed and swore loudly, and seemed to generally not give a shit about their customers.

The different jobs there at the underground places were essentially my job stripped down to its rawest, most primal form. Kitchen help juggled between serving patrons stale coffee and gambling themselves, while others would completely ignore patrons altogether. There were no smoke and mirrors when it came to the relationships between the owners, workers, and customers—customers knew that the owners were there to make money, and the owners did nothing to sugar-coat that fact in any way. Likewise, workers knew that their worth was measured by the success they had in winning money for the house—sometimes through less-than-desirable measures—and thus maintained as minimal a relationship with the customers as possible, so as to keep them coming back and giving the house a chance to win. Even the aforementioned kitchen help were considered valuable only if they contributed their paychecks to the table games around the den. Money ruled everything there, not unlike casinos on the strip; the only difference was there were no ideologies or regulations standing in the way of the owners running the places exactly the way they wanted to, unlike legal establishments who were constantly monitored by entities such as the Nevada Gaming Commission, the Food and Drug Administration, the Better Business Bureau, etc.

I left the Bicycle after just three months of work. The sit-down with management was a painful affair. My head felt like someone had taken a jackhammer to it from all the drinking I did the night before, and with each lashing-out from my superiors about my gambling and poor work ethic, I would have to bite my tongue till it probably bled a bit to keep all the alcohol from erupting from my mouth like a molten bile volcano. After taking the initiative to seek help, I learned that I wasn’t playing to make money per se, but because I didn’t want to deal with the pressures of living up to others’ expectations of me. I decided, then and there, that work should be something more than just earning
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a living or abiding by any one generic system or ideology. This is where my story officially begins. Welcome to Las Vegas.

Work=Fun

I don’t know what it was, but there was something exciting about the flashing lights and downtown nostalgia of Las Freakin’ Vegas. Looking back on that moment, I guess you could say the city really won me over in terms of the worldwide recognition it maintained, the worthy world-class accommodations in various hotels and nightclubs and, last but not least, the American dream of being able to turn nothing into something fast. Although not exactly Las Vegas, Henry Mayhew definitely had his finger on the pulse of the everyday hustle and bustle involved in making money, where he comments thoroughly in his *London Labour and the London Poor*. A scene in London that Mayhew described sounded so much like Vegas that I realized that, despite the advances we have made technologically, architecturally, or what have you, very little has changed in the essence of such places where, essentially, money is being made twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

Until it is seen and heard, we have no sense of the scramble that is going on throughout London for a living. The same scene takes place at the Brill [….]; go to whatever corner of the metropolis you please, either on a Saturday night or a Sunday morning, and there is the same shouting and the same struggling to get the penny profit out of the poor man’s Sunday dinner (15).

I saw Las Vegas in the same way that Mayhew observed the scene at “the Brill”: the entire town was breathing collectively, making money collectively, seizing opportunity collectively; it never rested, and so I sought to make my mark before I became the “poor man” giving up his dinner. Although the times have changed, life still seems to be more or less the same.

Having parlayed my misfortunes in gambling to becoming a licensed baccarat dealer, I eventually got my first job in Sin City at Sam Boyd’s The California casino. My interview with several members of the management personnel there went smoother
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than I had expected. They seemed to be most interested in the fact that I was from Hawai`i. The hiring manager asked a lot of questions pertaining to my affiliations with people from Hawai`i, how long I lived there, etc. At one point, I was even asked whether or not I could speak Hawaiian, to which a woman standing in the back aptly responded by saying “he means pidgin.” I discovered that a large percentage of the guests in The California were, in fact, made up of visitors from Hawai`i. Thus, my transition from dealer-in-training to full-fledged dealer at the casino couldn’t have been more comfortable and enjoyable. The culture of my workplace was rich and diverse, maybe because it paralleled the culture in Hawai`i—many dealers, waitresses, and restaurant staff all seemed to either be from Hawai`i or have had some connection to Hawai`i. Hell, even the menus in the restaurants featured popular dishes from Hawaii!

I was a part of a “system” within a carefully crafted “organizational culture,” as described by Edgar Shein in his piece on “Organizational Culture” (109). When I compare the way in which The California marketed a part of itself to certain clientele, I immediately recognized that everything from the dealers from Hawaii to the Portuguese Sausage, Eggs and Rice breakfast platter offered at the restaurant in the lobby were all a part of a system manufactured to serve a specific social unit. “With a growing emphasis on work groups and whole organizations came a greater need for concepts such as “system” that could describe what could be thought of as a pattern of norms and attitudes that cut across a whole social unit” (109-10). The entire system at The California—and other casinos in downtown Vegas where travelers from Hawaii frequented often—is really quite genius now that I look back on it all. Such a system, which was designed to make patrons comfortable and happy, was successful because it not only allowed travelers to identify with pieces of their identity from home, but also displayed those pieces for the rest of Vegas to see and appreciate; players from Hawaii—including me—exuded confidence, but most importantly, pride.

For the first time in my short career as a dealer, I found myself enjoying my job; the players were happy, and so was management. I felt a strong rapport with my customers, some of whom I saw more than a few times in the year or so I worked at The California. Although dealers were trained to maintain a level of professionalism and
impartiality, I found myself breaking those rules, often cursing with the customers at their bad run of cards, and cheering with them whenever they won. Management took notice of my actions on the table, but in a good way—or so I thought. I often received compliments from certain members of management, like “You’re doing good Chris,” or “Keep it up because the players seem really happy with you.” The boundaries of the rules were so undefined that I often had no idea where I stood in terms of my behavior on the table. Many of the players in downtown Las Vegas truly played for fun, and as long as they were happy and having fun, so was I.

Work=All Business

As far as my young career as a professional dealer in Las Vegas was concerned, it could not have started off any better. At an average of $150 per shift, the tokes were very generous, and on top of that customers constantly praised my presence on the tables to the floor managers and pit bosses. Most importantly, I continued to stay far away from the tables when I wasn’t working. After six months or so, I had a sit-down with my shift manager and someone who might have been the table games manager—it was an oral performance review of sorts.

“Yes,” said “JB,” the shift manager, “the players really like you and you exemplify everything that we are looking for in a ‘local’ dealer, but…”

But what? There can’t possibly be anything wrong with the job that I’m doing on those tables.

…it seems that you don’t have the will to make your players lose. You sometimes show the wrong emotions to your players.”

At that point JB sat back in his wrinkled, shitty two-piece suit and lifted his hands up to his face, covering his mouth. I felt betrayed. What the hell was this now? The table games manager whispered something into JB’s ear and left the room.

I started, “If you’re talking about my language, I can just as easily tone that stuff down—really, I’m not trying to be politically incorrect or anything.” I remember JB leaning toward me at that point, uttering words that I still remember to this day:
“You need to learn how to kill your players. Once you figure out what that means, maybe you’ll see how this business really works.”

I was stunned. I remember spending the next few days after the meeting figuring out a way to internalize such advice, especially when I saw my job as primarily making things fun and enjoyable for the players. The entire system at the casino that was designed to make my players happy was, in fact, nothing more than a tool to boost the company’s revenue. *Motherfuckers! But you knew this all along, didn’t you?* I looked inward for answers, but found none. With no real difference in principle between the legit casinos and the underground ones, it was, and always will be all about the money. So, was I really cheering customers on in hopes of enhancing their experience in Vegas, or was I doing it to rake in more tips? Likewise, was I sympathizing with losers like “Don”—who gambled at the casino every day despite protests and desperate phone calls from his wife and daughter—because I genuinely felt bad for him? I felt miserably fake and two-faced just then. I gradually began to lose significant components of my identity, almost as if they were being switched out for pieces manufactured by the gaming industry at large. Work had become a complicated proposition in that almost every thought and action—even outside of the establishment—was in some way or another affected by the hours I put in on the tables. The further from downtown I went, and the closer and closer I got to the glitzy high-class casinos on the strip, the more I began to internalize just how greedy the bastards running the whole charade really were.

My remaining time in downtown was a blast (it really wasn’t). I *loved* being a robotic asshole to customers (I hated it). I loved speaking in Standard American English to players from Hawaii who, suddenly, appeared so stupid to me (go fuck yourself for even writing this one). I *loved, loved, loved* that feeling I got when I drew a natural nine against some loser’s eight (I guess I did sometimes). I didn’t look to management for any improvement in their attitudes toward me, nor did I even care. I was conflicted. The job, it seemed, was not only changing me, but completely dominating who I was as a person. Thoughts raced around at light speed inside my head: *I’m better than these fuckers controlling the dealers; I’m better than this ghetto-ass casino; I’m better than a five-dollar minimum bet per hand; Hell, I’m even better*
than all the casinos in downtown combined. I’m a killer. Yeah, that’s it, a killer. Killer instinct is what it will take for me to take my game to the next level. I’m done with this fucking place. Good riddance.

Work=Experience

At this point in the narrative, the reader can pick any day of the week s/he chooses; s/he can also pick any month of any year between the years 2005-2009. Why? Because by this point in my life, I’ve experienced enough shit and dealt with enough people to finally come to the grand realization that each day entails the same type of shit, repeated over and over with a different supporting cast and slightly tweaked storylines. My storyline seems to be the only thing unique in my worklife narrative thus far; that is, everything else is nothing more than a fabrication of stories and imagery superimposed onto a manufactured background of the gaming industry’s carefully crafted choosing; nothing is real, everything is business. If I am to pluck a somewhat original and less-manufactured event from my worklife narrative as far as my ascension to the bright lights of the Las Vegas strip is concerned, perhaps I should start with my first few months as a dealer at the “V” hotel and casino.

The system at the V hotel and casino, when I first started, appeared to be very strict and rigid. The management personnel seemed to smile less; the security on the floor seemed to be tighter than other places; protocol surrounding the reporting of tips, monitoring of dealer’s lounges, pits, and cages, granting of lines of credit to players, etc. all seemed to be scrutinized closer than at my previous jobs. I realized that I was in a completely different environment even though I was dealing the same game. Coming out of the break room onto the floor for the first time, I was nervous. What if I mess up? What if I freeze and take the wrong juice? I can pay in the lower thousands no sweat, but over a hundred thousand? What if they bet in the millions?

The first table I ever dealt on in the high-limit baccarat room at the “V” hotel and casino had a minimum table bet of $500 and a maximum of $25,000 per hand. I clearly remember tapping in and introducing myself to a group of young twenty-something
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Chinese kids already deep in action. I remember seeing around eight towers of twenty $5,000 checks each, totaling $800,000, scattered in front of the young players. I looked over at the player’s card and noticed that it was a long banker. My heart immediately started to pound when I saw the amount that each kid was betting on the Bank. I scanned the bets and mentally noted that the bets totaled $100,000 and change. I prayed for the Player side to win so I wouldn’t have to calculate the juice on the winnings, which I was already trying to do in my head while controlling the action on the table, all while going through my usual repertoire of “place your bets,” “any more bets, please,” “all bets down,” and then having to pull the cards from the shoe and pass the cards to the biggest bettor. My heart now was beating harder than ever, the feeling of absolute terror so palpable I could have pissed myself.

...Please be a nine, please be a nine....

As there were no bets on the Player, I opened the cards to reveal a natural nine, the highest valued hand in Baccarat. Barring a tie, I knew that my first hand dealt at the casino would end up being a modestly lucrative one for the house. As I stacked the checks up and sorted them in the rack, I breathed a mental sigh of relief. Thank you God, I thought. Thank you.

I suppose some things can only be learned through experience. Over time, I went from being a fledgling novice to a true professional in the business. I figured out how to not only perform the requirements of my position at a high level, but also how to handle people from all walks of life: high-rollers, fish, whales, tourists, locals, Georges, etc. As much as JB’s final words rang true to me, I was happy to finally deem them not exactly wrong, but incomplete. In the gaming business, one has to be all of the above: a killer, a courtesan, an accommodating professional, but most importantly, great at what they do.

Work=Acculturation

One of the most interesting aspects of working as a Baccarat dealer and manager has to be the wide range of people from different cultural backgrounds who
cross the velvet plains of the tables in the exclusive High-Limit Baccarat rooms. Although the responsibilities of my job are limited on paper to a certain number of tasks and skills, the intangible expectations to be personable and as culturally fluent as possible are definitely just as important. In retrospect, I suppose it would be quite difficult to list such expectations in an employee handbook (incidentally, how would that read? “Must be able to adapt to and accommodate different cultures on the fly, even though you don’t speak the language”?). I saw my roots in Hawai`i as being a definite advantage where dealing with different races was concerned; I was comfortable around white, brown, purple,…well you get the picture. Because of the international clientele that the city caters to, casinos all around town were filled with almost every race you could think of: American, Chinese, Spanish, Middle-Eastern, Indian, Swiss, Korean ...you name it. The unusually high percentage of Asian players in Baccarat, however, limited my exposure to certain cultures on a day-to-day basis, but over a long enough timeline—in my case, roughly six years—there really wasn’t any culture that I wasn’t thoroughly exposed to.

In addition to hosting an actual game and bringing in the money that paid my salary, the tables were also hot beds for the exchange of information and gossip across many different cultures and social climates. In essence, another culture that was all its own was being created on the baccarat tables: the casino culture. The Baccarat table in many respects was a second home for some of the more seasoned gamblers, and much information and cultural tics were spread in a collaborative fashion. The acculturation, in the very definition of the word, wasn’t really an instilling of any one dominant culture into the ideals of various participants in the casino culture, but instead was a sharing and reciprocation of a wide range of different cultural backgrounds, languages, and ways of living.

Interestingly enough, the tide of the times sometimes paralleled the action we got on the table by particular players of particular ethnicities. Case in point: as talk around town of a booming Chinese economy and a spike in the number of millionaires and billionaires in China surfaced, I realized that there was a spike in the number of Chinese players in our high-limit room, adding to their already dominant numbers at the baccarat
tables—and they didn’t just play, but they played big. The parents of the young Chinese players I mentioned earlier were real estate tycoons who also heavily invested in other enterprises throughout Hong Kong and mainland China. Many of our Chinese clientele could speak English well, and would often impart information on the state of their economies and the different trends in their culture, ranging from pop culture scandals to sports. I also learned that a lot of the hundred or so dialects in China aren’t mutually intelligible. On top of all that, I taught myself how to count in Mandarin and Cantonese to deal with the players that didn’t have a strong grasp of the English language. I was able to pick up on a lot of the Chinese vocabulary that was unique to the game of Baccarat as well. All this I learned while “working.”

When South Korea finally granted its citizens a free travel visa, the number of South Korean players seemed to increase in our casino. Aside from the occasional Korean celebrity, I didn’t really see too many families and young couples around town and in the casino. Soon enough, however, I could hear my native language being spoken at work more often. Some personnel in management guessed it was the visa, while others still thought it might have something to do with South Korea’s improved economy. Regardless of what it was, our tables saw a moderate increase in South Korean players, although they weren’t as plentiful as the Chinese. Through some of the regulars and tourists, I was also kept abreast of current events in South Korea. For instance, when the South Korean president Roo Moo-Hyun committed suicide amidst allegations that he misappropriated government funds, the first person to tell me about it was, in fact, a player.

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After a while, I had a good feel for almost every single culture imaginable. In the case of our Spanish customers, sometimes I would count out the value of the cards to them in Spanish; for Japanese and Vietnamese customers, I would ask them “would you like to place a bet for this round” in their respective languages, sometimes garnering a “are you Japanese/Vietnamese?” The Chinese players, depending on which region of China they were from, used a vernacular pertaining to the game that was totally their own (though the South Koreans come pretty close). The Cantonese
speaking Chinese, in particular, have a very rich set of terms to refer to the different nuances of the game. Everything from patterns tracked on the player’s cards to how many hands a player wins in a row all have unique terms, many of which I adopted into my own vocabulary and used frequently on the table.

My skill at accommodating different cultures was utilized on the fly, often times on players seated on the same table from around the world. Some of my colleagues thought the accommodation of other cultures to such an extreme was an entirely ridiculous endeavor—they, unlike myself, did not see the need for communicating with the players beyond the game being played on the felt. I, on the other hand, really had a sense that there was something unique in the daily exchanges with players from different cultural backgrounds—I had much to learn about other cultures, but so did everybody else, players included. I was getting paid to up my cultural knowledge and experience other races in a way I think few others are able to experience.

Work=Opportunity

I arrive on the grounds of the casino about thirty minutes before the start of my shift. I walk through the lounge and greet some of the dealers sitting around on break. The dealer’s lounge for the high-limit Baccarat dealers is very exclusive and posh with various assortments of pastries and coffee and flat screen televisions scattered about. It’s been a few weeks since my promotion from dealer to floor person/manager, and since the promotion, every single aspect of my job seems to have that much more weight tacked on to it. Working as a floor manager is different from when I was working as a mere croupier, where I would deal for only an hour, break for twenty minutes, and repeat the process until the shift was over. As part of management, breaks are negotiated by management personnel, but must eventually add up to no more than 100 minutes of total break time per eight hour shift. The Nevada Gaming Commission is actually pretty rigid when it comes to making sure employees get sufficient break time; luckily for our dealers, they got to sit as they dealt while still getting their frequent breaks.
One of my responsibilities as floor manager is to make sure that staffing levels are adequate for the shift. Staffing decisions are contingent upon many factors: first and foremost, I make it a point to take note of which day of the week it is. The weekends at the casino usually tend to be busier, and as such, proper staffing levels need to be maintained in order to satisfactorily meet players’ needs. Second, depending on the shift, more or fewer dealers may be needed. For instance, we usually try to have around eight dealers for the day and swing shifts, and around four for the grave. Of course, these numbers fluctuate based on the number of tables open, which hinges on what day of the week it is, how much action there is in the high-limit room, etc. With three or so tables open on a typical Friday evening, I’d probably want to have eight dealers. But let’s say a familiar VIP has notified the casino of an impending stay some weeks in advance: special guests such as these also influence my decision in terms of which dealers I want working on the floor. If there was a particular dealer that our VIP preferred, I might go as far as to make sure that s/he is working during the VIP’s stay. Of course, none of these methods of catering to high-rollers and other players is outlined in any official management training program or manual; it is an acquired skill that I notice not all managers know quite how to incorporate, much less internalize.

In addition to supervising the dealers working on the floor, I also have to observe the customers and make sure that they are abiding by all house rules. A rule that is broken frequently is the use of cell phones and other electronic devices on the tables; it is forbidden, and players that repeatedly violate the rule could be asked to leave the casino. Also, customers that get too unruly or exhibit potentially dangerous behavior must also be dealt with promptly. Response time for security personnel is usually less than a few minutes, but a lot can happen in even that short of a time.

The system at the V hotel and casino was slightly different in that I was able to assist the pit bosses with some of their duties, due in part to a possible promotion that was rumored to be looming over the horizon for me. Duties included helping with pit transactions such as fills and handling credit and markers. Basically, we had to make sure that the total amount of the chips in the individual racks on each table were adequate according to the action on the tables, properly documented and that
necessary fills are made, transferring needed checks from the cage to the table. We also had to count the checks and make a note of any markers extended in order to make sure that the openers and closers matched up so that we could ultimately determine the win/loss state of the house at the end of each shift, especially at the end of ours.

The main duties of my job primarily dealt with player rating. Rating our players is one of the key components in enabling the business in the casino to run smoothly, as it is but the only way to track the betting patterns of our players. Essentially, as management personnel, we are trained to factor in different elements to determine a player’s overall disadvantage—i.e. the house advantage—in a particular situation. In baccarat, where typically eight decks are used per shoe or session of play, the speed of the game can vary depending on the number of players sitting on the table and the amount of action being taken at any given time. For instance, a player gambling with just one other person on the table would be rated differently—and more favorably—than if he were betting the same amount on a full table of fourteen players. Basically, the number of hands turned in an hour increases the fewer the number of participating players. Conversely, on a full table, the hands turned in an hour are reduced dramatically, as more time needs to be taken for dealers to urge players to bet and to pay out more bets in addition to the unpredictable nature of each individual player’s habits when squeezing their cards. After calculating the average bet per hand, per hour in relation to the speed of the game, I am then able to process the information and hand it over to the casino host, who can continue to use the gathered information to promote the casino appropriately. Promotions vary from offers to comp a guest’s stay and dining expenses, to offering tokens and table match play options.

Work=Strategies

Strategies—my job was full of them, for better or for worse. For example, a player who has just won a large sum of money is asking me to make reservations at one of the most expensive restaurants in our hotel; I tell him I will get right on it, and
disappear from his view. Of course, my fellow managers and I would like for our guest to stay and play with us a bit more, because if he doesn’t, we’ll almost certainly finish in the red for the shift. I decide to go back to the player and put a whole shtick about how I wasn’t able to reach the restaurant.

Perhaps you’d like to wait for a bit while we keep trying them? We can cover your chips for you and get you a drink while you wait.

I know, just as any player and dealer or manager knows, that as long as you are still around the general proximity of the table, you can’t really say that you’re done playing. My player sees a hand that he likes and shoves ten thousand into the middle; he soon forgets all about his reservation and plays furiously for another few hours.

As far as coming up with different ways to make sure a shift finishes in the black, there is no real training or even general acknowledgement from any higher-ups of the use of certain tactics on players. In some ways, I feel as if management has created such tactics on their own, but the use of similar tactics certainly varies from establishment to establishment. Getting players to stay is an intangible aspect of the job that I sometimes used to achieve a very tangible end: making the closing numbers at the end of the shift favorable in the eyes of the shift manager and casino management. I sometimes asked myself, “Would I be considered as performing on a lower level if I didn’t try to pull out all the stops to make sure we win?” One example is the occasional billionaire who visits the casino but only likes to play baccarat. We are notified ahead of time of their arrival, and make sure our best everything shows up to serve them while they are playing—including seasoned dealers and other familiar personnel that might have dealt with the guest at one time or another. Once, a high-roller wanted to eat sushi, but insisted that the sushi we offered in our hotels—we’re actually one of several hotels under the same ownership—was bad, and that we should send someone out to get the sushi from another place he always frequented. Of course, we have to oblige. Or, how about when another high-roller felt the need to dance on the table every time he won a hand (the casino actually got into a lot of trouble with the NGC for this). We often have no choice but to look the other way to oblige the players in this manner to keep them from playing at other establishments.
The lines between work and my own personal life were fast becoming blurry, and often enjoyably so. I actually made friends with a few of the elite clientele and many of the regulars that played in our pit. Of course, these relationships were very sensitive in that casino policy generally forbade any sort of consorting with players due to its efforts to regulate the maintenance of the integrity of the game as well as the corporate entity at large. Soon, the only friends I had were either co-workers or players made up of frequent visitors, VIPs, and regulars. Unless there was something of dire importance that needed to be handled at home, I was usually out with my “friends” having the time of my life. Oddly enough, our conversations and exclamations were often comprised of the subject of baccarat. My player friends were always intent on giving me the skinny on their latest losses or incredibly lucky wins; likewise, when my co-workers and I were out, we usually chatted about how much so-and-so lost or how lucky so-and-so was or, even worse, how bad of a job so-and-so was doing and how we would do a much better job, etc. My conversations outside of work became increasingly one-dimensional and it drove a lot of the close network of people around me that wasn’t in the business absolutely nuts.

My personal life outside of work brings me back to Goffman and his idea of “Regions and Region Behavior.” He defines a region as “any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception,” and goes on to say, “Regions vary, of course, to some degree to which they are bounded and according to the media of communication in which the barriers to perception occur” (106). Goffman references how the glass panels in broadcasting rooms, although isolating one region from another aurally, does not do so visually. He also describes the different regions in a “front” and “back” dichotomy: using the casino as an example, the tables and pits that host the players and hold most of the action would be considered the “front region,” whereas the dealer’s lounges and areas not accessible to players would be considered the “back regions.” Essentially, casino personnel and even players to a certain extent exhibit
behavior based on their surroundings. However, I saw the front region of the casino as extending to every corner of the strip—and in my case—even to the personal boundaries of the home. But, as work becomes life, and as the lines between them become gradually non-existent, the need to distinguish between the various behaviors and regions becomes less and less important. Are we—as in anyone who has ever or currently works—ever really out of the front region that Goffman describes, despite being physically removed from the workplace? If the majority of conversations at the nightclub or restaurant between my friends and co-workers revolve around various aspects of the gaming industry, where does one performance begin and another end?

***

After almost six full years in the gaming industry, it was time to take a break. On October 4th, 2007, my wife and I welcomed our beautiful daughter into the world, and I decided then and there that I would need to change my persona once again, this time to that of “Daddy.” Although the gaming business has temporarily lost a dedicated representative of its ideologies and ideals, it continues its function as an unrelenting capitalist beast. Because I am no longer a part of the gaming industry, I find that my life has changed dramatically, but not in any seemingly quantifiable way. While it is a joy to raise a family and be part of an older and much more time-honored ideal, I can’t say with certainty—in the face of all of the arguments I’ve presented—that one way of life is better or worse than the other; I simply categorize such experiences as “life.” It just might be that only when the components of work, family, school, and everything else in between are brought together that a true definition of life and living is achieved.

Sometimes we live what we assume are private lives (whatever that means exactly) while other times we seem to be living the lives that others expect us to live. Whatever the distinctions are, one thing is certain: our lives are our own, and we are constantly living it, no matter what we say or how we spin it.

Worklife = my life = the one and only me.
Appendix

Knowing the Game

Baccarat dealers are trained to be proficient in several tasks: first off, they have to be aware of the complete rules of the game. In the high-limit or “big baccarat” rooms, minimum and maximum bets tend to be higher than the mini-baccarat tables or at other low-limit tables in other casinos. Payouts require the dealer to pay exactly what is bet when a hand is won on the “Player.” For instance, if a thousand dollars is wagered and won on the “Player,” the dealer will pay out a thousand dollars exactly. However, if a bet is won on the “Banker” side, the dealer is required to pay out the amount bet on the hand, less five percent, which is also known as the rake or juice. In this case, an amount of $950 is won by the bettor; however, the full amount is paid out, with the rake [in this case, the $50] being placed on a designated spot above the betting area; such rakes must be paid before the player leaves the table. Bets won on the “Tie” pay out 9-1, and vary depending upon which casino you are playing at. Thus, a hundred dollar bet won on the “Tie” would pay $900, and so on. Also, dealing in the high-limit baccarat room requires the dealer to both deal the cards from the shoe as well as handle checks accordingly. The next section provides further, more detailed information.
Rules of the Game

Baccarat is a card game that is dealt from a shoe that holds 6 or 8 decks of cards. Two hands are dealt by the house dealer, the "banker" hand and the "player" hand. Before the hands are dealt, bets may be placed on the banker hand, on the player hand, or on a tie.

**Winning bets** on banker or player are paid 1:1, but a commission of 5% is charged on bank bets. Some casinos may charge a lower commission (e.g., at this writing, Binion's Horseshoe in Las Vegas charges 4%). Some sources report that **tie bets** are paid 8:1, while others claim that tie bets are paid 9:1, so this may vary from casino to casino. If there is a tie, bets on the banker or player are returned. Once a bet has been placed, there are no opportunities for further decisions -- both the banker hand and the player hand are dealt according to fixed rules, resulting in final hands of either two or three cards for each.

The **value of a hand** is determined by adding the values of its individual cards. Tens and face cards are counted as zero, while all other cards are counted by the number of "pips" on the card face. Only the last digit of the total is used, so all baccarat hands have values in the range 0 to 9 inclusive. The hand with the higher value wins; if the hands have the same value, the result is a tie.

**Rules for the player hand:** If the player's first two cards total 6 or more, then the player must stand without drawing a card. If the player's first two cards total 5 or less, the player must draw one additional card.
**Rules for the banker hand:** If the banker's first two cards total 7 or more, then the banker must stand without drawing a card. If the banker's first two cards total 0, 1, or 2, then the banker must draw one card. If the banker's first two cards total 3, 4, 5, or 6, then whether the banker draws is determined by the whether the player drew, and if so the value of the player's draw card, as shown by the table below.

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D = draw, N = no card drawn by player
Glossary

**Cage**  The area designated for and controlled by the casino cashier. The cage is the financial center of the casino and operates like a bank.

**Checks**  Negotiable gaming chip that has a specified value and can be used throughout the casino or redeemed for cash.

**Closer**  The form used by casino supervisory personnel to document the inventory of checks on the tables at the end of a shift. A shift closer serves as the following shift opener.

**Croupier**  A dealer.

**Dealer’s Lounge**  Break area for table games personnel.

**Fill**  A transfer of checks from the casino cashier to a table game, which is documented by a fill slip.

**Fill Slip**  A document that records the denominations and amount of checks, game number, game type, date, time, and signatures of the employees conducting the fill transaction.

**Fish**  A player who loses money, presumably because s/he is new to gambling.

**George**  Refers to players who tip big.

**High-roller**  A premium player.

**Juice**  The commission taken from a bet won by a player in Baccarat.

**Long Banker/Player**  A term used to describe a consecutive series of wins on either side.

**Marker**  Checks loaned to the player from the casino.

**Opener**  The form used by casino supervisory personnel to document the inventory of checks on a table at the beginning of a shift.

**Player’s Card**  A card in Baccarat used to track the progress of the game.

**Rack**  A plastic container in which you can transport and count large-denominational coins, slot machine tokens, and casino chips.
Squeeze  In baccarat, squeezing refers to when a player looks at his cards; there is a way to determine the value of a card besides looking at the numerical value outright. A player will “squeeze” two cards very carefully to determine the total value of their hand.

Tapping In  Dealers will “tap in” when taking over a dealer already working on a table, usually by tapping a dealer on the shoulder or back

Toke  Term used to describe tips given to casino personnel by players.

Whale  An incredibly lucky player or an extremely big bettor.