

The night owls of Dublin are not solely predators of the late clubs and basement bars, as **Cian O'Neill** and **Keith Brennan** discovered when they found themselves inside one of the city's exclusive casinos.

After passing the unusually tame doorman (it is a taken that all doormen must be ogres) you find yourself in a casino, sans the ogres, drunks and desperates of lore. There is a strict membership policy, and no alcohol.

First-timers present photo id (preferably a passport or drivers' licence) and details at reception. A provisional membership card is issued and on a third visit, the passport or driver's licence number may be noted down on the members' database to issue permanent membership. Neat dress is the basic code, but a suit is not strictly necessary.

The walk-in view of the entrance lobby is plush red carpet by the hectare, rococo ceiling work, a feeling of ease. Above all, civilised is the theme - a reflection of the overall experience. As a work of a marketing Metternich it is thorough, from the deference of the floorstaff to the diffident banter or anonymity of croupiers and dealers. An experience seeming effortlessly refined. The casino club is split into several different levels. The top floor is an apartment - the salon privee - for nightly rental, with canapés, a butler service and waiters and a full view of Merrion square all available for a mere €300.

The ground floor hosts the private rooms, used for corporate events, private games, bridge and poker classes. On our tour, the private room contained perhaps 40 people around 5 poker tables, playing both high stake and 20 games. The mood here is controlled yet considerably less restrained than the games tables. It is the same mood though - suited to

DICING WITH DEBT

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those comfortable with money and cards, be they professional gamblers or part-time poker players. When we entered the room, a sing-song was in progress. A sing-song conducted over pots constituted of 20 or 200 Euro bets, but a sing song nonetheless. Many of the players knew the waiters on a first-name basis. Croupiers joked with players over hands dealt with the same deft professionalism of the upstairs open tables. Dealing was soundless – there was only the smooth hush of money effortlessly spending itself, the soft hiss of cards on baize.

The first floor is occupied by the open gaming room, with Blackjack, Casino Brag and Roulette tables. If you have not casino gamed before, fear not. One might think, "This is more atmosphere than I can afford," and surveying the decor, the impeccable turn of dress and professional composure of the dealers, one might be apprehensive. However, the process is unchangeable, and money is money. The dealers read moment by moment, cartographers of the crowd. They remain quite unfazed.

To Blackjack then. Seated at our table were four players, directly across from the dealer. Chips were exchanged when money was put down. No hand contact – the cameras (2 cameras per table) are watching the players and the croupiers - a type of clinical fiscal intercourse, the sex of money if you will. And so the game begins.

For those unacquainted with the rules, the aim is to reach, or get as close to 21 as possible. All players play against the dealer. The dealer must reach 16. If they fail, they must draw again. All cards are dealt face up. You do not touch the cards in the same way the dealer does not touch you - out of a feeling of civility, fair play, and closely studied rules.

The emotions at play are not physically interpersonal. The language of the body is replaced by the rhythm of rifled chips. Play is quick. The decisions one must make in blackjack are few. Minimum stakes on the table we played at were €3. Maximum €250. This means, of course, that you can lose an awful lot of money quickly. Or, by the same token, very little slowly. In blackjack, you may also win. This partially depends on how good a player you are. Both you and the dealer are playing against the same odds. You have only one another to beat and the odds do not seem stacked in favour of the house. As we played, any feelings of discomfort dissipated. The atmosphere permeates the players. One need only observe the more seasoned hands. Tap the table once to draw another card, stay on 15 if the probability is that court cards are in the deck. Double up when the opportunity arises and it is favourable. Lose graciously, and win with quiet pleasure. Even though your Mam told you not to, do ask the dealer's advice.

We circulated around the room after an hour of blackjack. You can see different dynamics at different tables. On our table, the dealer had been relatively quiet, conversing with those who were open to conversation, quietly issuing words of advice to those who

were less certain, joking over wins and losses. The table behind us was considerably more animated, the players betting high stakes, berating the dealer for unfavourable cards, crowing over wins, yet audibly. The dealer barely spoke a word beyond the bare prerequisites, announcing hand values as the cards were dealt, paying blackjack odds, offering insurance and the chance to double up. He presented no more than an efficient pair of hands to the table, a sustained anonymity. Again, that is the practice. The table closest to the door was lively in an amicable fashion. Congregated around the dealer's table were a group of seven amateurs who constantly requested his advice. He celebrated their wins, commiserated on their losses, advised them clearly, concisely, and amicably on odds, theory and practice. So, a different arrangement. The previous table had been about money, with all the posture of monetary conflict. This table was not about money, nor about walking away with 'all or nothing'. It was about spending a certain amount for a good night out. Risk and chance. Skill. They have their own seduction, incidental to economics.

More than poker, more than blackjack, more than screaming slots in seaside purgatories. What we think of when we think Casino, is roulette. All or nothing desperation, lost money, men in texas hats and no care as to the amounts involved. The reality is more complex than one night of inquiry could determine. The roulette tables were quiet on our evening there, with few people wagering.

While at blackjack, both dealer and player are set against the same set of odds and skill and judgement can be the fine line between overall wins and losses, in Roulette, the house has the odds. The player is against 35 other numbers. Skill, prayer, judgement and God have nothing to do with the outcome.

There was one man wrapped intently around his sizeable stack of chips, which he bet in their entirety on one turn. Before the wheel came to turn, he had calmly set out an arrangement of stacks, laying off bets against foreseen possibilities. With the wheel running he stepped back, seemingly happy with the pattern of possibilities he had insured himself against.

As the turn wound down, hunched with thought and action, he arranged the remainder with a haste that indicated that the surruration of the wheel's turn was audible only to him.

His back tensed as he arched to cover the world unfolding before him. More and more rapidly his hands travelled the table - until his stack was spent. He sagged in relief at having finally disgorged the totality of his sum. Turning with perfect calm as the croupier raked in his stake, he took a sip of his cola, thanked the croupier for an enjoyable night. Exit stage left with a thin ghost of a smile. He seemed unconcerned as he left. Relieved. This then, was pure risk, raw chance, tempered by solipsistic concentration. An extended moment of adrenalin rush, an instant there then gone. Roulette. Sounds like...money.