The Future of
LIVE TABLE GAMES

George Melas explains how the use of market-driven high-tech, combined with effective marketing strategy allows for the generation of new Casino revenue, rather than merely re-directing the revenue from slots to live table games

OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES, slot machines have enjoyed a huge transformation from the old stand-alone mechanical assemblies. Now, state-of-the-art multi-game stations have in-built libraries of high-resolution audio-visual games, offering different games at the touch of the screen. The new generation of games are imaginative and challenging. Attention grabbing and entertaining, they promise multi-site progressive jackpots and loyalty club benefits that players (and operators) find hard to resist.

Over the same period, however, table games have remained relatively unaffected by high technology; as a result, the revenue advantage once enjoyed by the tables has been reversed in favour of the slots, to such an extent that today two-thirds of Casino revenue in the United States is slot related.

PLAYER PROFILES

There would appear to be many reasons for the transformation and consequent shift in revenue that now favours the slots. No assessment of the distribution of Casino revenue would be complete without considering the effect of player profile. Until recently, the younger and more computer literate players favoured the slots, whereas the older and wealthier players gravitated towards the table games. What is certain, however, is that many observers maintain that the level of technology currently applied to live table games could not achieve the benefits associated with slots.
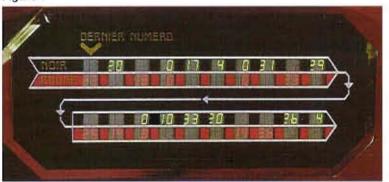
Figure 1

TABLE TECHNOLOGY

Whatever the level of their technology, it is the live table games which characterise the Casino gaming floor, providing the Casino ambience – so important for establishing a loyal clientele. It is hard to imagine replacing the human dealer with a machine, however sophisticated, whilst maintaining the same ambience. A gaming floor without blackjack, craps or the characteristic sound of the roulette ball spinning around the ball-track would resemble more of a 'slot parlour' or video arcade, rather than a Casino floor.

Early game developers had a difficult task in convincing Casino operators of the benefits which their low technology products would provide to table games – leaving a legacy that has continued, to a greater or lesser extent, up to this day. On reflection, this was due to a combination of the following factors:

- Low technology products;
- The marketing strategies current at the time;
- Technophobic players and operators;
- The resistance to change of a traditional and often reserved gaming environment.

The application of technology to table games has been rather slow. If I recall correctly, it was in the early 1980s that technology made its debut with live table games. Primitive dot matrix winning number displays **(see Figure 1)** and manually operated calculator-style financial systems appeared, employing programmes small enough to satisfy the limitations of early microprocessor and Personal Computer (PC) systems.

Largely thanks to the slots, by the late 1980s, the suspicion of electronic gadgetry had faded. This allowed for the use of well-known electronic circuitry (sensors and display units) to be used on live table games. At this point, the migration of known technology to live table games had begun. Whilst the electronic sensors had allowed the application of early gaming systems to bring the 'slots feeling' to the tables, now progressive

jackpots could provide the benefits of large payoffs for relatively small side wagers. By the early 1990s, the more general acceptance of glitzy odometer-type displays and faster computers, with more memory and compact high-resolution graphics screens, had paved the way. More advanced gaming concepts could now be applied to the live gaming tables, for example, progressive jackpots.

By the late 1990s, high technology had become available and affordable. The computer age had spawned a new generation of players; no longer technophobic but instead, computer literate. They had been brought up in an environment of video games, television and high tech electronic 'toys'. Most of these players, whatever their age, would possess several e-mail addresses and were ready for new gaming concepts. Interestingly, a recent market research survey conducted on live table games has suggested that players do not recall anything 'new' or 'memorable' from the gaming floor; nothing that has 'impressed' them or captured their imagination.

HIGH TECHNOLOGY BENEFITS

There is no doubt that today's high technology offers significant benefits to both players and operators. For example, game developers have been able to apply high technology to more sophisticated gaming concepts, succeeding in emulating table games with slot machines and slot machines with table games. Hence, they have combined the 'slots excitement' with live table games and vice versa. Clearly, this powerful concept is no longer confined to the traditional gaming floor; the embodiment or method of the concept can be applied to other areas of recreation, for example linked Internet gaming or gaming in one's hotel room or home.

In addition to their acceptance of low cost high technology, the new generation of players are veterans of relentless advertising campaigns, whether on television or elsewhere. These players are ready for the benefits that only high technology gaming concepts can offer. Advertisers assure us that when their campaigns target specific audience segments, people recall advertisements, remember particular products and react in statistically predictable ways. The market is now ready for a high tech driven marketing strategy that provides, inter alia, the following benefits:

- A personal service to make the player feel special;
- Complimentaries, cash-backs, bonus and loyalty schemes;
- Effective advertising, incorporating promotions and information campaigns;
- A variety of new, imaginative, memorable and entertaining games;

- The option to win multi-site progressive 'Giga-Bucks', Mystery Prizes and Star Awards 'for-a-dollar';
- Portable loyalty credits.

However evolution affects the market, there will always be the followers of its more traditional segments – eg, the specialised progressive games and card rooms. This point aside, the dichotomy in gaming behaviour is narrowing fast. The time has now come to generate new Casino revenue, as opposed to merely re-circulating it from slots to live table games.

COMBINING BENEFITS

Table games are here to stay. The combined effect of low cost and high technology, a new generation of players and of operators willing to adopt the high technology will provide the means to achieve market driven benefits – so elusive for so long. A radical approach is now needed; new table game designs must be 'memorable' and must utilise modern concepts to incorporate the benefits that have proved so effective in other diverse industries. This approach will attract a new generation of players and increase market share rather than re-routing players from one part of the Casino floor to another.

New technology has the capacity to link slots, live tables and electromechanical playing stations; this provides for the implementation of multi-site progressive and accumulative jackpots. The full use of this technology can only come about in combination with the following:

- Electronic sensors;
- Player tracking;
- Financial analysis;
- Loyalty club;
- Cash back schemes;
- Multimedia;
- Interactive audio-visual systems;
- Internet gaming;
- Closed circuit television gaming action playback;
- News, reviews and sports events;
- Advertising and Promotions;
- Gaming information, training and statistics.

The full integration of these factors within an effective marketing strategy and linked to a secondary game will allow participating players to win 'GigaBucks' for 'micro-wagers'. The players will then no doubt, at last, have a truly 'memorable' experience.

SECONDARY GAME

A secondary game – eg, blackjack, slot machine and roulette – will operate in virtual reality (VR), in parallel to the primary or host game – eg, roulette and poker; this will help to generate tremendous benefits. Although the

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Figure 3

individual technologies are themselves well known, their application to live tables is novel. What is certain is that their use on the gaming floor will provide a powerful tool that will enable the evolution of live gaming tables (and slots) to take place.

Special secondary games operating in VR could provide novel stories with challenging characters and symbols – perhaps familiar symbols the players understand, and find easy to relate to. Further, the secondary game process and outcome (occurring in VR) can be displayed directly upon the players' screen or, if required, other screens. This would provide for the so-called player 'anticipation factor' whether the game process is actually occurring in VR or in real time. A comparison with slot technology suggests that when the secondary game is linked to networked host tables (whether on land or sea), it will challenge the notion that only the slots can provide 'MegaBucks' at a 'pull of the handle'.

The new technology lends itself to the implementation of compact modular systems. The operator will have the choice to build and expand on the benefits a modular system can provide, tailoring the modules to the desired operation. There is no doubt that only high technology can provide the new and exciting benefits. I would not be surprised to see, for example, the use of holographic lithography displays. With game patterns and projected statistical trends of behaviour shown on photo-resist-coated substrates, they might be positioned on the tables or just 'hung' in the air, elusive yet tangible.

Sub-miniature fingerprint sensors *(www.precise-biometrics.com)* and player tracking cards, including data on fingerprints, now extensively used to confirm the identity of customers withdrawing cash, may also be used at gaming stations for card-less player tracking.

HIGH-TECH SYSTEMS

Recent exhibitions confirm that the trend of applying high technology to live tables *(eg, Digital 21 shown in Figure 2)* is increasing with more operators now installing the newer systems. For example, at the World Gaming Congress and Expo in Las Vegas, John Huxley market-researched modules of the Infinity Plus® system *(eg, BJ display shown in Figure 3)*. Market reaction proved so encouraging that other game developers have joined the high tech bandwagon, introducing informative displays, video playback of gaming action on table screens and video clips of sports events on slot displays.

The evolution in table games technology continues; game developers are now probing the frontiers of technology, knowing all too well that only a market driven application of high technology programme will provide the benefits which the new generation of players (and operators) demand. ∎

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Figure 2