

Tourney Time

Technology has changed the way casinos stage slot tournaments

By Frank Legato



As much as technology has changed everyday life, it has changed the casino floor. Today's slot floor bears little resemblance to the floor of 30 years ago, or even 10 years ago. But through all that change, one method of promoting the slot floor has remained at the forefront: the slot tournament.

Slot tournaments themselves, in fact, remained unchanged from when slot machines first soared in popularity in the 1980s until well into the 21st century. An operator would either identify a bank of machines to be used as tournament games, placing them in a roped-off area—idle, aside from the tournaments—or would purchase tournament chips for a bank of games and have teams of attendants physically switch the game chips out before and after the events.

Neither method was perfect. The first way would waste valuable floor space on non-earning machines. The second way was very labor-intensive, not to mention the few horror stories over the years of attendants inadvertently leaving a 120-percent-payback chip in a machine after a tournament.

Over the years, operators accepted the problems inherent with each method, since slot tournaments have always been effective as player's club rewards and customer loyalty incentives, not to mention filling the slot floor with incremental play on otherwise slow days.

For the past decade, technology from several suppliers has solved the age-old problems of slot tournaments, as well as offering new, entertaining play experiences that give operators the option to move away from the old repeti-

tive 10-minute bash-fest that constituted the old-school slot tournament.

Suppliers now offer tournament games with special features to boost points, or others that use favorites already on the floor as tournament games—all switching between tournament and in-revenue mode instantly. No roped-off idle machines, no more outdated games used only for tournaments, and nearly none of the labor costs of the old days.

These days, tournaments are as small or as large as a casino needs, and can involve the old roped-off special-event tournaments as they always were, on-demand sessions at a player's leisure as a reward for achieving point thresholds on the slots, or just about any other configuration that suits the promotional needs of the moment.

Technology and Opportunism

As it turns out, the old problems of slot tournaments were not solved by the operators' teams responsible for staging the events, but by the technology pouring from the slot manufacturers—beginning with a pioneering system from what was then Austin, Texas-based Multimedia Games, one of the two legacy companies of today's Everi Holdings.

Ironically, the technology that would become the groundbreaking TournEvent tournament product was the result of a larger technological trend that ultimately did not pan out—the early 2000s frenzy to develop server-based slot systems.

In the mid-2000s, Multimedia Games introduced a server-based system



called Casino Commander, which enabled timed changes of games, denominations and payouts, scheduled according to the time of day or week, or on the fly, for any given number of slot machines. However, regulations in many jurisdictions prevented widespread adoption.

“Operators were still tied to the red tape they had to use with tribal gaming authorities to create a paperwork trail to change a game or payout,” recalls John Carpenter, senior product manager at Everi. However, he says, changing a game instantaneously for a promotional tournament—and then back to revenue mode just as quickly—carried no regulatory roadblocks, as well as solving all those old tournament efficiency issues.

“So, we took all the best features of the system, and in 2010, we rebranded the tournament module as TournEvent. Over the last eight years, it’s grown from less than 10 sites to now over 400 sites with 5,000-plus machines.”

The TournEvent system caught on quickly with Multimedia customers, and has continued to grow in popularity since the merger that created Everi. “We really focused, early on, on making the system efficient for operators,” Carpenter says. “That was the real key—working to automate specific tasks operators were doing previously, and reducing the overhead so they didn’t have to have an army of staff to run these events.”

TournEvent also was different in the nature of the tournament games themselves. Early on, the company created unique games tailored to create excitement in the contests. Players still bashed the button on a video slot, but balloons and other objects would float across the touch-screen surface, adding points if the player touched them on the screen. Other features, like a “Jump to First” feature that would load a random contestant’s point total to first in the contest, would keep players engaged.

Soon, the available tournament games themselves multiplied. Today, there are 22 unique titles, ranging from holiday themes to different interactive bonuses, and even a complete skill-based contest based on the game Fruit Ninja.

One distinguishing factor of TournEvent is an integral video host—or the ability to have an actual host as an emcee for each tournament. In 2012, the company first exploited this feature by traveling to customer locations for satellite contests in what became known as the TournEvent of Champions, the first two being statewide tournaments in California and Washington. In 2013, the event went national, and in 2015, the company staged its first TournEvent with a \$1 million top prize, awarded in tournament finals in Las Vegas—all finalists, winners of the satellite contests, getting airfare and accommodations for “Everi’s The Million Dollar Event” in Las Vegas, every one winning a cash prize of at least \$500.

Today, the TournEvent system has installations in Canada and South



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—Jay Bertsch, Vice President of Global System Sales, Konami Gaming

America as well as the U.S.

It also has an increasing lineup of competition from other suppliers, each of which has poured new development money into tournament products.

System-Friendly

While Everi’s TournEvent certainly injected new life into the genre, other suppliers have captured the benefits of tournaments minus the old hassles by utilizing the evolving technology of casino management systems.

In 2011, Scientific Games (then Bally Technologies) launched its first tournament products run through its casino management systems.

Using the Bally iVIEW Display Manager installed on slots of both SG and competitors, the company launched what is now Scientific Games DM Tournaments, part of the Elite Bonus Suite (EBS) of player rewards downloaded through the system to active carded slot machines.

The EBS group includes Virtual Racing, a floor-wide bonus video horse race played out on the monitors, and several individual bonus games as well as the DM Tournament module, which allowed casinos to configure slot tournaments on any group of machines, up to an entire casino, choosing any configuration of scheduled session times.

The tournaments run on the iVIEW displays of all the machines, with any of several hit Scientific Games themes as the tournament game. The first DM Tournaments were run on three-reel and five-reel video versions of Bally games Hot Shot and Quick Hit, but Scientific Games has since added more games carrying content from both Bally and WMS legacy game libraries. Customers can now opt to stage tournaments using Hot Shot, Monopoly, Jackpot Frenzy or Quick Hit Mania themes.



IGT Spin-Splasion



IGT IncrediBell!

Scientific Games now also offers DM Tournaments Express, which is a stand-alone module that can run the same tournaments without having to integrate with the casino management system.

“Tournaments Express can be installed onto any EGM that is compatible with iVIEW Display Manager, of which there are over 200 compatible slot cabinets from over 20 different manufacturers, with no back-end integration,” explains Tony Alanis, senior product manager for Scientific Games. “It creates a roped-off tournament that can be enabled or disabled whenever you want.” Operators are able to switch between in-revenue and tournament mode through the DM Tournaments Express application.

DM Tournaments allow operators flexibility to design their own tournaments—free-play rewards, invite-only, buy-in contest, player-start tournaments, group-start tournaments and more. “Ultimately, you can get into your multi-day, multi-session, multi-round, shuffled-prize tournament,” Alanis says.

The tournament offering also is being refined by other slot suppliers in conjunction with casino management systems—namely, the Synkros system from Konami and the Advantage system from International Game Technology.

According to Jay Bertsch, vice president of global system sales for Konami Gaming, Konami first added a tournament module to Synkros in 2012. Called True-Time Tournaments, the system allows operators to schedule synchronized or on-demand tournaments that automatically qualify carded players for entry based on specific criteria and behavior. “Today it is used across many different types of casino properties to bring the excitement of slot tournaments to any number of machines by any manufacturer, with the tap of a button,” Bertsch says.

“Depending on a property’s unique promotional needs, True-Time Tournaments has the flexibility to deliver synchronized tournament games and on-demand tournament games to reward carded players. Some of our customers create dedicated sections where their players compete in synchronized tournaments, others like floor-wide events, others award entries for players to access on-demand at their convenience. Some properties will circulate through any number of these depending on the particular promotion.”

IGT, meanwhile, offers three tournament game groups under its TournX-treme product, which is powered by the Tournament Manager system. “The Tournament Manager product is an agnostic module, meaning it can exist on a casino floor that is managed by another casino management system, or it can exist within our Advantage ecosystem,” explains Michael Ratner, director of product management for IGT. “Obviously, there are benefits when it’s coupled

to our Advantage system.”

He says with Tournament Manager as part of the Advantage system, “you can use a tournament entry as a currency, a way to reward your player. For any kind of activity your player may do on the casino floor—time-based, coin-in based, it’s your birthday—you have this tournament currency in addition to the other currencies.”

But what’s truly unique about Tournament Manager is that it feeds tournaments to three completely different game styles—stepper slots, video reel games and video poker games. “IGT is the only manufacturer in the industry that offers all three modes of gaming—poker, stepper and video—within the tournament space,” Ratner says.

“Under the same Tournament Manager application, you are able to now offer your players on the casino floor an opportunity to play traditional stepper tournaments, video reel tournaments and poker tournaments—and in fact, you can stage a tournament in which all of your tournament attendees get to play all three separately, and consolidate their scores into one score.

“So, as a casino operator, you have tremendous flexibility in offering your players various tournament experiences, or you can create one tournament experience that includes all three.”

Flexibility First

Flexibility, in fact, is arguably the first consideration in new additions to all the top tournament systems. Everi, for example, this year will launch TournEvent Now, part of the TournEvent 6.0 version previewed at last fall’s Global Gaming Expo. The new feature enables an on-demand first round for events such as the national TournEvent of Champions.

“We see the TournEvent Now functionality taking over the Round One qualifier,” says Carpenter, “where operators are spending a lot of time and energy with their support staff in getting 1,000 people in Round One to qualify for the next round. With TournEvent Now, the operator will set requirements ahead of time that enable a player to walk up to a slot machine in revenue mode and put their card in. If that player is eligible, a pop-up will appear and ask them if they want to play TournEvent Now.”

When the player accepts the invitation, the game—which would be a core Everi game in revenue mode—instantly converts to tournament mode, and switches back to revenue mode when the tournament session ends.

“The operator doesn’t need to rope off the machines, or get people on and off,” Carpenter says. “Now we can get those thousand people through the tour-

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“One of the flexibilities of DM Tournaments and DM Tournament Express module is that our tournament harness is compatible with over 200 cabinets. Not only SG cabinets, but also competitor cabinets.”

—Tony Alanis, Senior Product Manager, Scientific Games



nament on their own time, at their own pace, and we still have a qualifier where a certain number of people will advance to Round Two, and that’s your community-style event, the same tried-and-true contest where everyone’s competing against their neighbors.”

Julia Kelly, director of creative marketing and promotions for Everi, says adding this mode of session—sometimes called “sit-and-go” or “walk-up”—has additional benefits for the operator. “You can use this as a qualifying event that serves as a bounce-back,” Kelly says.

“For example, ‘You qualified for this next event that’s happening on Wednesday.’ Maybe they hadn’t planned to come on Wednesday. That’s additional revenue we’re helping the operator bring into the casino that wasn’t there before.”

Scientific Games’ DM Tournaments system also includes an on-demand tournament feature. “The operator has the ability to configure earning qualifications,” explains Alanis, “so those earning qualifications can be based on coin-in, coin-loss, or other certain player-based criteria, and then, once they’ve progressed toward the tournament, we can enable a feature where they can go in and play a tournament with other players across the floor who may be eligible for that tournament.”

Players follow their progress toward a tournament entry through a bar on the iVIEW display, which will change color when the player is eligible.

“That is essentially a satellite tournament that’s not in a roped-off environment,” Alanis says.

Flexibility in the newest tournament systems also extends to the hardware. Tournament themes are no longer confined to special machines or cabinets—games that are established earners serve as the in-revenue versions of the machines for live play between tournaments. “In revenue

mode, we have 150-plus standard video titles they can play that include high- and low-denom, and different payouts,” says Everi’s Carpenter. “We have the 22 unique titles that make up our out-of-revenue tournament game library.”

Other tournament systems are using in-revenue games from their core libraries as well. “Synkros True-Time Tournaments doesn’t require dedicated machines,” says Konami’s Bertsch. “It allows players to both earn tournament entries from any machine and play tournaments on any True-Time Windowing-equipped machines.”

He adds those machines don’t have to be Konami games. “Practically any touch-screen enabled gaming device can be instantly transformed into a tournament-capable machine, and then returned back into revenue-generating game play,” Bertsch says. “Everything is managed, controlled and deployed through the Synkros casino management system, so casino operators don’t have to reserve dedicated tournament-only machines or purchase a large set of specialized game cabinets.”

For tournament mode, Konami has loaded Synkros True-Time Tournaments with a library of tournament game themes, including Midway Madness, Hero Collection, Fruit Funds, Romancing the Reels and more.

Players have the option to choose their game theme on Synkros. Players are given a menu of game theme options when claiming their tournament entries. This is a feature that operators can enable or disable, for any number of available tournament themes.

Scientific Games’ DM Tournaments was one of the pioneers of system tournaments across all cabinets on a slot floor. “One of the flexibilities of DM Tournaments and DM Tournaments Express module is that our tournament harness is compatible with over 200 cabinets,” says Alanis. “Not only SG cabinets, but also competitor cabinets.”

This capability is what enabled huge events like the World’s Largest Slot Tournament at Mohegan Sun and a similar event at Pechanga in California, both property-wide slot tournaments.

IGT’s Tournament Manager system, of course, adds the flexibility of allowing players to choose between steppers, video reels and video poker—and allows operators to tailor promotions to each type of player. “We found our customers are catering toward specific demographics—people who love poker, people who love stepper, and so forth,” says Ratner. “We’re trying to convey to our customers that a tournament experience doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re catering to a specific demographic. However, while your players may not want to play video poker, as a fun experience, you can expose them to a video poker tournament if you want.”

Ratner says IGT’s system also uses proven performers in revenue mode.

"I believe a really compelling, unique selling proposition with our product is that we're able to take our very best machines and best themes, so when the tournament is not in action, the operator has the benefit of cash mode," he says.

"In other words, they're just regular slot machines. But the beauty of this is it's on our latest cabinets, with our latest themes—Scarab, Solar Disc, Golden Egypt, you name it—as regular cash machines. And they're easily switchable over to tournament mode. So you have the benefit of both worlds."

Into the Future

Suppliers of tournament products continue to push the innovation envelope with new features, and unique tournament games that are increasingly creative, from themes like the tried-and-true Scientific Games titles to Everi's skill-based Fruit Ninja to IGT's specially designed video reel game for Tournament Manager, IncrediBell, which themes each round according to a period in the history of the slot machine.

The tournaments themselves will continue to evolve. "As it becomes more competitive," says Scientific Games' Alanis, "being more dynamic will be important, when it comes to the ability to offer the tournaments not only in the brick-and-mortar, but to allow players to play tournaments on their mobile device, and also possibly through an SG Digital web portal as well."

"I think as jurisdictions become more flexible with their offerings, and allow patrons to plug into their mobile device or a web portal, sending an SMS message that you have the ability to play a tournament now from your mobile device—I think that's where the market is going."

IGT's Ratner notes that the "old-school" slot tournament is still available to any customer who wants it. "There's nothing wrong with doing that—if it works for you, then by all means do it. But there are more efficient ways of doing it. The savings come from not having to have someone walk around and physically place machines into a tournament mode. The number of people required to run a tournament is reduced, and most importantly, the machines, when not in tournament mode, are in cash mode, and are still the most sought-after titles."

"The tournament idea will always be around," says Everi's Carpenter. "We don't see it going anywhere, and it's always going to be used as a promotional tool for the casino to provide the excitement that customers love about a tournament—smashing the button at a hundred times a second, and yelling and screaming, is always something that attracts a crowd and gives players an opportunity to participate in an exciting event."

"Tournaments will always be used as a currency to reward players, or incentivize players to do certain things. And once they've qualified for an event, that excitement resonates with players, and they will continue to come back."



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