



Turning the Tables

Innovations in table-games tech mean a win-win for operators and players

By Dave Bontempo

Table games mimic the epic phrase pitched by late actor Telly Savalas for Player's Club International ads back in the 1980s: "It's bonus time, baby." And, in this era, it's bonus time like never before.

Table games ride the technology vaulting them into a new wild-card world. Whether it's the menu of e-tables, the linked functionality with slots or the innovation of lucky chips and lucky seats for patrons, there's new prominence for gaming's classic wagering sector. The area once overtaken by slots enjoys a rise led by younger players and an expanded gambling pool sparked by the mobile age.

Companies steer new products to this lucrative new trend built atop an age-old foundation. Side bets, after all, were practically stitched into the gaming fabric. Wild-card wagers marked the kitchen-game card era of one-eyed jacks, split-whiskered kings, "baseball" and acey-deucey.

They extended to the casino craps realm of horn, high yos, hard ways and any sevens. The newly upgraded legalized sports-betting world offers in-game betting and parlays, boosting gambling options to the point of near-absolute indulgence.

It's bonus time indeed, but not just for the patrons.

The Thrive at Five

Gimme five. It's been a celebratory high-five slap for Scientific Games over its five-year run in this area.

The industry giant gained instant table-games prominence in 2014

with the acquisition of Bally Technologies. One year earlier, Bally had obtained Shuffle Master, the worldwide leader in card shufflers and proprietary table games.

Scientific Games became an instant table-games force, the Monopoly equivalent of spending one's first dollar building Park Place and Boardwalk hotels. The company has parlayed its position by wielding innovative product offerings.

Roger Snow, senior vice president of table products, has amassed several decorations, creating or co-creating more than 25 games and side bets covering thousands of tables in 50 countries. The lineup includes Ultimate Texas Hold'em, Four-Card Poker, Dragon Bonus Baccarat and DJ Wild Stud Poker.

One of Snow's boldest efforts is Blazing 7s Roulette, which he launched with Scientific Games employee Michael Vizzo. It lets a player win up to 500-to-1 on a single roulette spin. Snow believes the product could have another three years of upside potential, and he likes the market position table games have rallied to gain.

"It's stronger than ever," he says. "Not that long ago, it looked like table games were headed for extinction. Casinos were ripping out pits in favor of slot machines. Games like blackjack and craps were on the wane. And save for some specialty titles like Three Card Poker and Ultimate Texas Hold'em, there wasn't a whole lot to get excited about.

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Snow considers progressives the hottest products in the sector.

"You have them on the specialty games," he says. "You have them on blackjack. You have them, albeit to a smaller extent, on baccarat. And you will soon have them on roulette and craps. This is the big wave in our industry, and it's only going to grow."

Snow believes poker-based content will continue driving the success for table games. Besides Three Card Poker and Mississippi Stud, Snow says there are some terrific new games like High Card Flush, Criss Cross Poker and DJ Wild. These games may not reach the prominence of Caribbean Stud or Ultimate Texas Hold'em—the market is too fragmented nowadays—but they will all gain a significant niche, Snow says.

The company's hottest game is Face Up Pai Gow Poker. This is a commission-free pai gow game it picked up from outside inventor Johnny Lee. With respect reserved for a fellow inventor, Snow highly endorses it.

"If you're a game inventor, this is one of those games you smack yourself in the head because you didn't think of it—it's absolutely brilliant," he says. "The dealer shows his hand and arranges it in front of the players. Because of this, players are always able to optimize the way they arrange their hands. Plus—and this is the best part—if players can't beat or at least tie, they muck their hand. Because of this, and the fact there is no 5% commission on winning hands, casinos are reporting up to a 25% increase in hands per hour. So, not only is this a great game, but it's a great utility device for speeding up play."

Blending the Best

IGT, the global gaming-machine, lottery and research and development powerhouse, embraces its own version of the tables-slots marriage.

"There's a huge demand within the table games market to be able to deliver 'slot-style' bonusing promotions to table game players," says Eric Lancaster, senior director of systems product management for IGT. "Pit bosses and table game marketers have seen the success that bonusing drives within the slot business and are eager to mimic this in the tables business."

Bonusing shows the versatility of Table Manager, the automated system that maximizes rating accuracy and delivers compelling promotions to table players. This mature product has long been hailed for rating and comping table games players, capturing true game handle and revealing betting patterns. It also incorporates table promotions. Table Manager offers Lucky Seat and Lucky Chip bonusing that mimic the popular IGT Advantage

casino management system's Carded Lucky Time and Carded Lucky Coin bonusing products.

"Table Manager provides a friendly user experience and a differentiator, because the product quickly and efficiently provides users with actionable and relevant information," he says. "The two bonusing products within it enable management and marketers to extend 'slot' bonusing applications to table game players.

"Table Manager is fully integrated into the IGT Advantage system, and pulls data from the patron management and cage modules to allow the tracking of players while on the table—average bet, time played, buy in, credit, comps, etc. In situations where Table Manager is installed as a stand-alone product, it can connect to other host systems to extract the same data."

Lucky Seat enables casino marketers to create and schedule promotional drawings for their table game players, he says. It allows operators to configure a promotional prize for those customers. Once started, a promotion runs for a set period. At the end of that period, one or more winners are randomly selected from currently eligible players.

A Matching Bet coupon award, for example, can start at a property on Friday at 5 p.m. Every hour for five hours, a drawing is run and a winner is selected. This includes rated and name-refused players at all blackjack tables in every pit.

Lucky Chip creates progressive jackpot promotions specifically for the table game. The Lucky Chip bonus selects a random player rating based on qualifying criteria operators set during a scheduled period. Awards can be either a fixed or pooled amount. The bonus integrates with digital signage to drive play and create an event when the bonus is won. No additional bet is required to be eligible.

Table Hot Seat is a time-based mystery jackpot that can only hit within a specific time frame chosen. Operators can drive play during slow periods or match awards to periodic activities. Carded and uncarded versions give operators the flexibility to choose which players qualify for the bonus.

Features include the ability to produce 16 different bonus periods, each focusing on specific time frames. It can run on a single table, a pit or across the entire floor. Bonus jackpots can be funded as play occurs or as a fixed amount. The product helps operators link to video monitors, meters and audio systems to increase excitement.

It's based on the highly successful Lucky Time slot bonus.

Staxed

AGS touts Stax, the newest addition to its table-game progressive offerings. The product brings unprecedented player excitement to nearly any

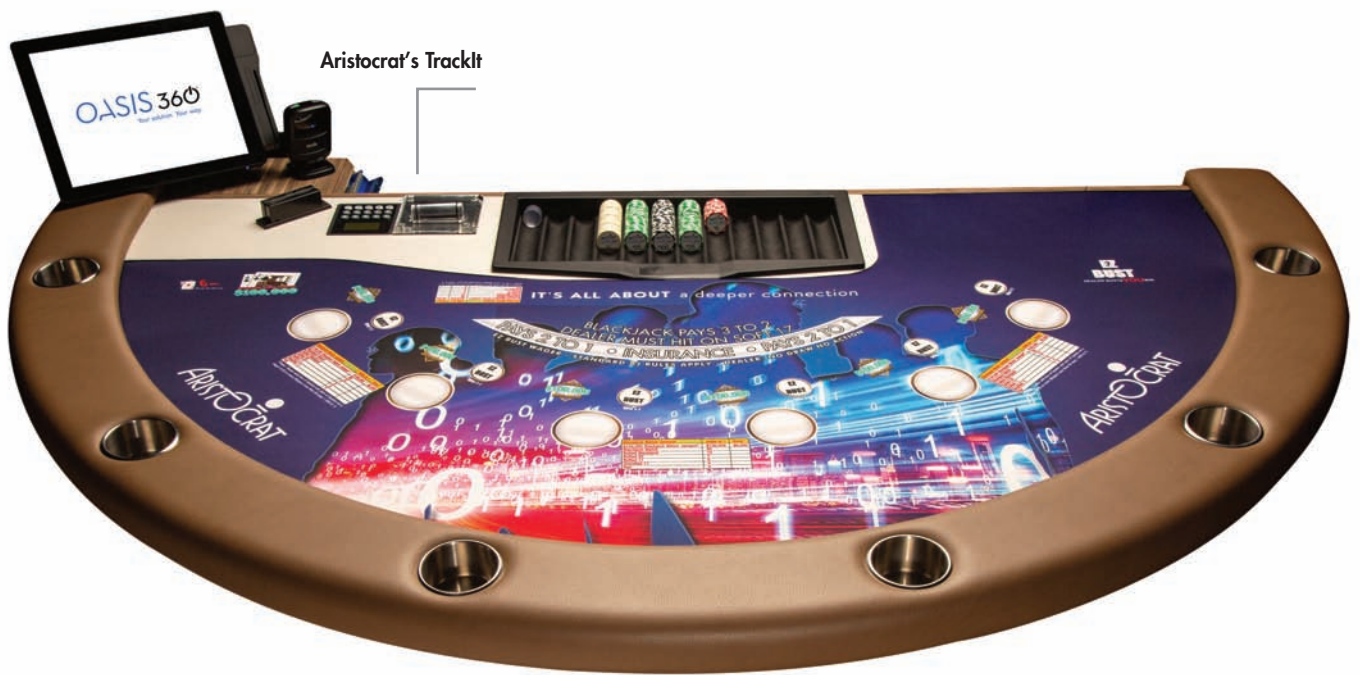


table game, officials say, with dynamic links to multi-level and must-hit-by jackpots.

This unique multi-level progressive system enables operators to offer up to five different prize pools. With configurable settings and engaging displays, Stax offers these and other features for seamless integration into the table game pit.

Product features include light-up bet sensors, dynamic double-sided display, customizable reserves for each prize pool and automated prize-pool contribution adjustments along with web-based reporting and configuration, plus an optional must-hit-by prize pool and tablet-style dealer interface.

AGS is firmly planted in the Class II Native American gaming market, but has branched out to become an all-inclusive commercial gaming supplier.

Good Timing

Aristocrat Technologies, a subsidiary of Aristocrat Leisure Ltd., finds a new way to double down. This year, the company expects to double its installs of TrackIt, which links the functions of slots and table games.

The timing is sound. While bonusing innovations abound, advancements like this one improve the infrastructure surrounding table games. With the proliferation of wild-card wagers, TrackIt can get players to a seat at the table more quickly.

The newest version of TrackIt was unveiled last fall at the Global Gaming Expo, and also implemented at Maryland's Live! casino for tables with vouchers and RFID. The implementation is the first in North America.

TrackIt has been Aristocrat's table game management solution for about four years. The rollout, coupled with the hiring of Gavin McPhail as



the unit's director of systems product management last November, indicates the company's increased interest in table games.

"The company has been investing heavily in this sector," McPhail says. "Table game management systems have been evolving for the last 25 years, and the expectation nowadays is to be able to deliver a system that can streamline the table operations, making it more accurate and closer to what an operator expects on a slot floor.

"We really want to grow this area. We want to drive it, grab it and get people involved in everything from the entry level to the Rolls-Royce of what we offer. We see this as a growing part of the ATI business."

TrackIt, part of Aristocrat's Oasis 360 table management solution, allows players to take vouchers printed at the slot machine and redeem them at the table for chips. It also enables operators to issue vouchers at the end of the table-game play session that can be redeemed at any redemption kiosk or the casino cage. The product also reduces cage lines for players and table fills for operators.

Dealers and/or supervisors can scan vouchers using bar-code scanner equipment at the table, increasing table game utilization. TrackIt's RFID chip count sensor detects the value of chips returned before the dealer/supervisor can issue a walked-with value. If the chips detected by the RFID chip count sensor do not match the value input for the voucher, the system automatically generates an error message that notifies the user of the incorrect values.

McPhail touts TrackIt on a multi-benefit scale. "This is a modular solution," he says. "The software allows us to scale from entry level to very sophisticated operators and/or markets. We can go from simple pit solutions to our full automated RFID table that even includes ticket voucher-ing and mobile customer logins. The full RFID solution tracks all



wagering at the table in real time as well as all cash movements with our VIVO solution.”

The hardware gets retrofitted to the table, equipped with sensors and RFID. It works with the table-enterprise software that is part of the Oasis system.

McPhail considers RFID, sensors, bonusing and vouchering at the table main ingredients for operator demand.

“Any type of application that can provide the operator some kind of ROI whether it be operation efficiencies or increment patron spend, is important,” he says. “Casinos want ease of use, accurate ratings and additional data.”

Customizing the Tables

For London-based table-game supply giant TCSJohnHuxley, the bonusing function is wrapped into the Gaming Floor Live solution, a technological ecosystem designed to give casinos real-time visibility and total control over their gaming floor through seven unique modules.

One of those modules provides the kind of bonusing that is currently bringing new players to the pit. GFL Bonusing gives casinos the tools to customize their games, the goal to keep players at the table and achieve the best hold possi-

ble. With this module, operators can create multiple bespoke progressives and side bets for any table game, monitor the success of them in real time and, if necessary, modify the game configurations instantly (subject to local regulations).

GFL Bonusing allows for the setup of player-funded jackpot pools, where after the initial jackpot put-in (the seed), casinos allocate side-bet funds into jackpot pools. These pools can be set to fund the winnings of jackpots but also replenish and fill up higher-yielding jackpots, keeping excitement on tables to its fullest.

Progressive jackpots increment when a bet is placed and “reset” once won. However, if one jackpot is won, the others remain in play until they are also won.

GFL Bonusing can be tailored to the demands of any unique player demographic. Not only does this help generate truly meaningful jackpots for players, but it also helps to increase table revenues.

All this new technology is bringing new players to the pit the same way slot technology has maintained its own loyal legion of players—bonuses, progressives and new elements of the game.

In short, it’s bonus time in the pit.

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