

## Virtual Fun with Digital Table Games

*By James J. Hodi*

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Would you like to play some blackjack?

It is not unusual to hear such a question asked while walking through a casino. But it is when that question comes not from a live dealer, but from a virtual dealer looming larger-than-life-size from a video screen behind the blackjack table. Welcome to the world of virtual table games, a new computer-based alternative that enables Native American casinos to serve more players for longer hours, with greater wagering options and at lower cost.

“Digital table game systems are the next evolution of gaming equipment in that they create a virtual gaming area in which cards, chips-and in some cases dealers- are replaced by computer-generated versions,” said Mike Daly, Tablemaster products manager at Las Vegas-based Shuffle Master. This evolution has been occurring slowly over the last decade, and there are already many choices available to casinos looking for something novel and eye catching-especially to young customers raised on video games.

Virtual playing cards, which replace traditional cardstock, are where the digital table games revolution began, and many current systems incorporate them. The Digital Card System (DCS), developed by Spokane, Washington-based DigiDeal, employs a virtual card delivery system and a live dealer who controls the action. At the press of a button by a live dealer, the virtual cards are electronically shuffled in less time than with cardstock, and dealt to players, on whose personal table-embedded video screens they appear.

“DCS eliminates the shuffling mistakes that annoy players, and the opportunity for cheating, such as card marking and nicking,” said Dave Krise, DigiDeal vice president and creative director. “While maintaining the feel and play of traditional games, DCS enables casinos to customize rules and retrieve game statistics that cannot be done on traditional tables. The speed of shuffling doubles the number of games that can be played hourly on a table, yet little training is required for dealers to operate the system.” Another cost saving for casinos is that virtual cards don’t wear out like cardstock, which requires frequent replacement, Krise noted.

DigiDeal added the Virtual Chip System (VCS) in late 2004. With VCS, customers can input player cards or tickets into the system to get virtual betting chips on a video screen. Players can control the size of their bets and choose when to cash out at the press of a button, which prints a ticket convertible to currency at teller cages.

Virtual dealers (up to four, both male and female) are the main feature of the Tablemaster platform distributed by Shuffle Master. Appearing twice the normal size on projection TV screens before the system’s five player stations, the “dealers” are made up of several hundred prerecorded video vignettes that an internal computer calls up and plays in reaction to how customers

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play the video-generated cards they are dealt. This results in the appearance and feel of a game presided over by a flesh-and-blood dealer, Daly claims. "Digital table game systems like Tablemaster enable casinos to better serve their customers' need to play during both peak and off-hour periods," he said.

When all card table positions are full, casinos can open a section of digital game tables to handle the excess demand before such customers head elsewhere, Daly noted. And digital table games can be operated during night hours when it isn't economically feasible to have live dealers on duty. "Most casual gamblers gravitate to the low-wager tables, but when business is slow, those \$2 and \$3 blackjack and card tables can lose money," he said. "Unmanned digital tables can turn a profit on a slow night."

Greg Liggett, director of slot operations at Barona Valley Ranch Resort & Casino in San Diego, agrees. Barona, which in early 2004 was the first to install Tablemaster on its casino floor, has found the platform "a great entry-level system," Liggett said. "Some beginning players are intimidated by live dealers. The virtual system gives these players a place to learn blackjack rules and build up their playing skills and confidence before moving up to a manned table. Unmanned (non-salaried dealer) tables also enable Barona to continue to offer tables with \$1 and \$2 bets, and thus serve the small wagerer who finds the \$5-and \$10-manned tables too rich for their blood."

Blackjack isn't the only card game to be digitized for a virtual environment. Tablemaster systems also provide popular games like Three-Card Poker and Let It Ride, with additional games in development. Switching games requires inserting a different game CD and installation of new button panels, tabletop and marquee overlays—a process that takes less than two hours.

The TableMAX system from Beverly Hills-based TableMax North America, offers in digital form several popular card games developed by Mikohn Gaming, including Caribbean Stud Poker, Caribbean Draw Poker, Bonus Blackjack and Jackpot Pai Gow Poker. With a Windows XPE/VOS operating system and a Pentium IV game processor, TableMAX systems include a progressive jackpot system that adds excitement to games by building a grand prize in a manner similar to slot machines. TableMAX also pays more money back to players than traditional table games, with payouts programmed in down to three of a kind instead of a flush. TableLink technology enables TableMAX tables to be connected not only to all tables within a casino, but to all tables in a jurisdiction, which allows progressive jackpots to rise up to 100-times faster than traditional table games, thus making these digital games more exciting to players.

A small footprint enabling installation in the most compact casino areas is a selling point of the tabletop version of the Heads Up Poker video poker machine being readied for early 2005 introduction by Huntington Beach, Calif.-based Gamecraft. This version still offers three varieties of poker, but adds the ability of players to play against others around the system's four-position table in which players face each other like at a home poker game. Incorporating all the strategy of poker, players can raise, pass, fold or try to bluff opponents—all through button presses—against other players at the table, or the system's "Pay Table," said Darrel Meiers, Gamecraft's marketing manager.

Rapid Roulette, developed by Australia-based Stargames, digitizes another type of table game. This multi-player game recreates the action of roulette (including the wheel) in a virtual environment with the exception of the live croupier. Players can move virtual chips on a virtual betting table and enter the amount of their bets all by pressing buttons on their individual plasma video screens. Depending on the outcome of the "wheel spin," the amount of the bet is automatically deducted-or the winnings added- to the player's virtual bankroll (on a player card). According to Stargames, Rapid Roulette permits an increased number of plays (up to 55) per hour, resulting in increased revenues for the casino.

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