

Table Setters: Customers And Operators Alike Falling for Multiplayer Electronic Table Games

By John Grochowski

Way back in 1999, when DigiDeal Corp. was getting started in marketing its Digital Card System, there was both intrigue and resistance.

“There was something of a learning curve,” remembered Dave Krise, DigiDeal’s vice president for design and development. “People would stop and look, and tell us it looks cool, but didn’t completely trust it.”

“Now we don’t ever hear that. Younger players are comfortable with it. They grew up on Pong and Atari, if not Xbox and Nintendo.”

Slowly but surely, multiplayer electronic versions of standard table games are carving out a niche in the global casino market, with DigiDeal, Shuffle Master, Star Games and TCS John Huxley among the companies vying for floor space. Their reach extends from South America to Australia, Europe to Asian markets such as Macao.

In the United States, that share is biggest in jurisdiction such as North Carolina that do not permit live table games, but even in Las Vegas, electronic games provide a change of pace. Rapid Roulette, for instance, brought into the Shuffle Master fold when Shuffle Master acquired Star Games, is played in Las Vegas at Harrah’s, the Rio, Caesars Palace, Bally’s, the Flamingo and Paris.

The issues go beyond player acceptance and regulatory concerns. Kristen Clark, director of marketing for Shuffle Master, pointed to “incremental game speed. You get a greater number of hands per hour. The time between rounds and payouts is reduced. You don’t have to worry about misplays by the dealer or disputes. Game security is very, very important.”

At Harrah’s Cherokee in North Carolina, vice president of operations Lumpy Lambert said DigiDeal games have worked well. Harrah’s Cherokee uses three DigiDeal games-Digital 21, the blackjack side bet Bonanza Blackjack and the baccarat game Baccarito.

“It’s only fair to say that in North Carolina, the digital format is the only legal one, our only exposure to the tables,” Lambert said. “But our customers like the games. Player perception is that they’re always going to want a link to live tables, a link to live action.”

Until our compact changes, we can’t give them live tables, but we do the best we can to offer that kind of action. “The games use a live dealer and chips, with dealer entertainers. They pay the bets, take the money and keep track of the tray. They’re certainly more entertainers than live dealers. One of the biggest benefits of digital vs. live cards is that we do not have the labor of dealing the cards and it eliminates concepts of cheating and card counting.”

Krise sees the use of a live dealer as a strength of the DigiDeal system, and he said there are 165 DCS units in use around the world, including Asia, South America and several U.S. jurisdictions.

“Our whole goal, our philosophy is that we feel we give a true table game experience,” Krise said. “Using a live dealer is an important part of that. With DCS, we use live chips. On our

“Player perception is that they’re always going to want a link to live tables, a link to live action.”

Even with digital chips, interaction with a live dealer will be an important part of the DigiDeal experience.

new system, DTS, or Digital Table System, we will use virtual chips. DTS will have a bill validator, ticket-out and real-time accounting. Chips will be on screen, with a touch screen to place bets.

Even with digital chips, interaction with a live dealer will be an important part of the DigiDeal experience. Krise underscored that point by mentioning that DigiDeal will be operating under license from the World Poker Tour for the digital version of the All-In Hold 'Em Fold 'Em table game.

"With the WPT, there's great name recognition," said Krise. "It's hard to run without a dealer. There are so many facets to the game including a multiple side bet. The dealer keeps track and pays in a timely manner.

"On DTS, the gaming host still administers the game. He puts money in the bill validator. The table doesn't have six bill validators. It has one. He tells people when to place bets and what to do. The dealer takes through the flop, turn and river. It's all facilitated through the dealer."

In addition to Digital 21, Bonanza Blackjack and Baccarito, DigiDeal currently offers the multi-player slot-game-come-to-tables Fishin' Buddies, the slot hybrid SlotJack and the five-card stud poker game Trips.

Virtual Advantage

Roulette is not on DigiDeal's list, but it's a staple for Star Games and Shuffle Master. Before being acquired by Shuffle Master, Star Games already was showing strength with Rapid Roulette, which does use a live dealer, and with the roulette game on its Vegas Star system, which used a virtual dealer on a central screen.

"Rapid Roulette is very well known in Australia," said Shuffle Master's Clark. "Star Games developed it in partnership with Crown Casino (in Melbourne). Rapid Sicbo is also available in many casinos in Australia. In the Australian gamine market, Star Games has great penetration."

In Rapid Roulette, instead of customers placing chips on a felt layout, each player has a screen on which to place bets. There remains a live dealer and a physical wheel, but the responsibility for tracking bets and accounting for chips is removed from the dealer. Cheating scams such as past posting-sneaking a bet onto the layout after the ball has fallen into a numbered slot-are eliminated. The dealer spins the wheel and interacts with the players, but the system tracks the bets.

Star Games also offers its Vegas Star system for electronic blackjack, roulette, sic bo and baccarat games. A large central video display takes the place of a dealer. Likewise, Shuffle Master uses a video representation of a dealer on the large central screen in its new Table Master system. "Table Master uses an animated dealer, and every effort was made to make it more realistic," Clark explained. "Live people were recorded, with appropriate footage for every situation, and not just during play. When it's in tracking mode, the dealer looks around. It can't respond. If you walk by and say 'Hey baby, how's it going?' it can't hear you. But at the table it will respond when you bet or fold, it will prompt you."

Part of the success of the Table Master system, Clark said, is that players are responding to the personalities of the virtual dealers. "On the casino floors, each dealer is developing her own following. Players have favorite dealers. We get e-mail to our Web site asking more information on them." Table Master is available for blackjack, Three Card Poker and let It Ride Bonus with

“With the WPT, there’s great name recognition,” said Krise. “It’s hard to run without a dealer. There are so many facets to the game including a multiple side bet. The dealer keeps track and pays in a timely manner.”

a 3 Card Bonus. Coming soon are Dragon Bonus Baccarat and Royal Match 21. Clark said 65 units were installed in the Table Master rollout last year, “and that’s pretty significant, given the price tag.”

One of the early customers is the Thunderbird Casino in Guatemala City, Guatemala. There, director of operations Tony Carver said, “Live table games are not legal here, so I bought a Table Master Blackjack and a Three Card Poker. We operate them just off the main floor in our VIP room. The 21 is doing very well, with a win that’s about normal for a table—very good for a machine-only market. The Three Card Poker has not done as well. It’s still very hard for me to say, however, I think customers believe in live tables more than electronic.

“We also currently have two electronic roulettes that are doing very well. We will have a Caribbean Stud poker in a few weeks—that’s TCS John Huxley. Being that few if any employees are needed, low maintenance costs, etc. they make money.”

UK-based TCS John Huxley distributes not only the electronic Caribbean Stud game Carver will be using in Guatemala, but also offers Electronic SicBo in either 56-bet or 106-bet combinations, a game called Fantastic Dice, with player terminals circling around a central display of rolling dice and another called Stardust, with Five, seven, eight, 10 or 12 player positions ringing an automatic wheel at the center. Each player terminal has a bill validator and a ticket printer for payouts.

One intriguing TCS John Huxley offering can take roulette to any corner of the casino. That’s Touch Table Roulette, which links a 42-inch plasma display to a live roulette wheel. Four players sit around the display, each with their own touch screen interface to make wagers. With the Touch Tables, operators can provide a roulette outpost anywhere in the casino.

Dealers Secure

With the inroads they’re making now, manufacturers have high hopes that the place for such multiplayer electronic table games will be increasing. From aspects of cost, dealer training, game control, accountability and security, they have much to offer.

“Where we see these games down the road is integrated into the pits,” Clark said. “Dealers see it and fear we’re coming after their jobs. We’re not targeting their jobs. This is an alternative delivery system. It’s hard to offer a 50-cent bet on a live table. We can be profitable at smaller minimum bets. We see this as having a separate place among table games.”

At Harrah’s Cherokee, Lambert has seen enough reaction from his customers to think the virtual games might just have a place even in casinos that can offer live table games.

“If you look at the slot business, and gaming in general, there’s a lot of movement toward video-based games,” he said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if digital table games became more and more popular. The younger demographic is accustomed to playing online. They’re exposed to digital gaming through online gaming. I have no proof, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the trend is that the younger, hip-hop group will migrate toward digital games.”