

Op Ed/Editorials - Gambling and the Law: The Casino of the Immediate Future

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The casino of the future can be found today, in countries like Vietnam and Cambodia.

Many countries have allowed casinos, restricted to foreign tourists. The ones I visited in Cambodia were in hotels in Siem Reap, near the famous ruins of Angkor Wat.

What is unusual is to see table games like roulette and baccarat. In a majority of jurisdictions in the world today, casinos are limited to slot machines.

I didn't see any human dealers in Hanoi or Ho Chin Min City. But the casinos had the latest in gaming technology.

The casino of the immediate future has gaming fusion: machines that allow patrons to play table games. The technology ranges from simple to ingenious. Most common are linked video screens. Some of this has come to California card clubs, where each player at a Texas Hold 'Em table has his own video screen for his down cards and a larger screen in the center for the community cards. A more sophisticated version would allow a player to play using his BlackBerry.

More than a dozen manufacturers make automated roulette wheels. All have real spinning wheels; some with video cameras to allow players to actually see the ball drop into the slot.

To introduce Asian players to gaming devices, a Hong Kong company has developed the multi-station "LIVE Baccarat." There is a real human dealer dealing real paper cards. But her image is projected on a large screen. And players bet on their own video monitors. I saw 40 machines linked in one game in a casino in Macau. Up to 100 patrons can play at one time in stadium-style seating.

The next step is to eliminate the player and cards. Blackjack with holographic dealers has been around for years. But in Asia its animations. My favorite was the cartoon blue-eyed blond at the Wynne Macau, who spoke perfect Cantonese on one screen, and perfect Mandarin on another.

A Taiwan company took another route. Its “Robot Casino” has an automatic shuffler and a cute robot arm deal real paper cards. The game is baccarat, so everything is behind glass. The robot shows the cards to the players, who are betting on terminals.

Necessity, in the form of local laws, is the mother of invention. The law in Taiwan prohibits anyone from touching the gaming tools. So, bars use bingo ball blowers with 52 balls painted to look like playing cards to play baccarat.

Are these slot machines? Usually operators argue that they are, because table games are prohibited. But in California a video poker table is still poker, because players are playing against each other, not the machine.

Regulators are finding it difficult to keep up with these changes. Most jurisdictions don't have clear statutory definitions of what is allowed, let alone standards for testing these gaming devices.

Private enterprise can act, and react, faster than government. So the independent Gaming Laboratories International is already testing and certifying many of these inventions.

Large, established gaming jurisdictions are more cautious. And the procedures for promulgating regulations can drag out the process. In 2007 the New Jersey Casino Control Commission finally amended its regulations to let Atlantic City casinos try out electronic table games for roulette and poker, in response to the gaming devices being put in racinos in Pennsylvania and Delaware.

In the past, states and nations looked to Las Vegas and Monte Carlo for their models of what a casino should look like. But if you want to see a casino of the immediate future today, you have to go to Vietnam.

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