The Elements of a Successful Carnival Game
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The Global Gaming Expo (G2E) took place this year November 14 – 16, 2006 at the Las Vegas Convention Center. This exposition is the gauntlet through which most new table games pass on their way towards an uncertain future. Many of these games are produced by individual inventors with little experience in the industry. With enthusiasm and hope leading them, they believe their game is the great new idea that will change the landscape of modern casinos. They invest their last dollars on a booth at G2E and impatiently await the landslide of casino interest.

On the other side, casinos and Table Game Directors are inundated with new games. The line of developers with "great new ideas" stretches out the door, around the corner and down the block. Each developer has a long list of reasons his game is the best new idea since Three Card Poker™; the big "if" is getting to the front of the line.

Michael Shackleford (the "Wizard of Odds") puts it this way: "The perception of those new to the business is that casino management will fall all over themselves trying to get your game into their casino. What is closer to reality is that game inventors fall all over themselves trying to get their games into a casino."

When the developer finally gets his moment, he often misses the most important point. The developer presents his game in terms of how much money it will make for the casino – it's an absolute number. The casino's view is relative: the new game has to make more than the worst performing game already on the floor.

All is not lost for the developer. Casinos are looking for new games all the time and there is an unprecedented need for new Table games in the market. Even though there is a lot of competition, players want both variety and contemporary themes and the market is constantly changing.

There are some basic principles that guide Carnival game development. These principles are also a guide to casino management in choosing new Carnival games. As game designs and ideas flood the market, a mutual understanding of the basic parameters for successful new games becomes critical.

Presented here are ten principles for game design, development and selection:

1) The idea of a new table game should be explainable to a person of average intelligence in less than 30 seconds. It is much easier for the patron to walk past a new game than to have the game explained. The prospective player will pass if the game idea and strategy is not intuitive.

2) There should be at most one side bet. Many inventors create a basic game idea then over-populate their layout with every side bet idea that they can think of. Their idea is that if the main game isn't attractive, then maybe they player will find some other reason to play. Those games offering multiple wagering options have not seen much success.

3) The layout should be simple and natural to use. The developer should always be thinking about what they can remove from their layout and still express the idea of the game. The layout should use mostly positive and power words (win, bonus, fortune, lucky, etc.). When naming elements of the game, numbers and negative terminology should be avoided. As an example of the power

of words we turn to Blackjack: "everyone knows" you should not take "Insurance," but also, "everyone knows" you should take "Even Money."

4) The game should have a house edge consistent with the edge for other games in its category. For the main game of a new Carnival game, the edge should be between 2% and 6% (the recommended range is 3% - 5%). For the side bet (if any) the edge should be variable and easily adjusted by the house to meet their needs.

5) The name of the game and the actual play of the game should involve an idea that has popular interest in the culture. For example, "Pete's Poker" is much more likely to be successful than "Chad's Chess."

6) The game should be easy for the staff, management, dealers and casino security to learn. The rules and layout should be designed to minimize dealer errors and training time. The documentation of the game should be as simple, clear and attractive as possible.

7) The game should not involve new physical elements. The established elements of cards and dice are enough. New devices require new security and training and are usually enough to doom the idea.

8) In the last three years there were over 50 Hold 'Em poker clones presented at G2E. This indicates the need in the market for poker games, but also that there is a lot of competition. Anyone developing a Carnival game needs to know the full range of games offered in his area of development. Do your research!

9) Both the casino and the game designer must keep in mind that there are individuals dedicated to finding legal ways to exploit defects in the procedure or design of a game for profit. The game must be bullet tested against advantage play. This is much tougher than might first appear. The ingenuity of those who want to defeat new games far exceeds the skill of most designers or casino personnel to detect these flaws.

10) Finally, a word of caution. Most games are leased on a monthly per-table basis. The top players in the Carnival game market are raising their prices on their best games. Casinos pay as much as $2000 per month of a single table of some highly popular games. Developers should offer and casinos should expect a great deal on a new game. The lucky developer may get rich on the new game, but not quickly. It costs a small fortune to make a big fortune.

As a game analyst and consultant, I am often presented with ideas that go against one or more of the principles given above. Many game developers stubbornly hold on to their ideas. Success requires a great idea, a solid understanding of what works, and the ability to be flexible. If developers consider these points in their creative process and management considers these points in their game selection process, there may be considerably less pain for both sides.