

New Skill-Based Casino Slots Play for Video Gamers

Written by Administrator

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Atari's 1981 hit Centipede is an antique in the video game world, but it's the hottest new thing in the casino industry.

Slot machine manufacturers are rolling out a raft of games inspired by the penny arcade, hoping to attract middle-aged gamblers with a dose of nostalgia and the promise of finally cashing in on all those hours spent in front of a screen.

A Centipede slot machine to hit casino floors soon is more than just a clever licensing deal, or a sign of gambling's cosmetic change from one-armed bandits to touch screens and digital music. It's part of a new generation of models that let users show off a rare casino trait: skill.

The game, developed by International Game Technology, the industry's largest slot manufacturer, converts points earned shooting digital insects directly into money. If two gamblers sit down at an identical machine, the better shot will walk away with more cash.

At the gambling industry's annual trade show in Las Vegas this week, a stream of men in suits sat down to try out the new game. Bodies swaying around a joystick, they maneuvered their character on an overhead screen, dodging spider attacks and shooting at creepy insects amid a flurry of "pew pew" sounds.

IGT's competitors are taking note.

Several manufacturers, including WMS and Aristocrat, say they are working on incorporating skill into their own games. Bally Technologies is approaching the trend differently, trying to bring back high score pride. Two of its newer games, Skee-Ball and Total Blast, let players log their initials on a scoreboard. The player doesn't get paid out directly in cash, but can monitor the standings on Facebook.

"The casino would love it if players are like, 'Oh I got beat! I have to go back and play some more to get in the lead,'" Bally spokesman Mike Trask said. "If they were 15 years old in 1985

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playing against their friends, trying to get the highest score, that person is almost 50 years old now, and they're right in the demographic."

Industry honchos hope the new breed of games will help slots beat their reputation as "day care for the elderly." The games are normally marketed toward women ages 55 to 65.

"I grew up playing Atari and Nintendo, and I want to believe my skill in these games has some effect on the outcome," said Geoff Freeman, the 38 year-old head of the American Gambling Association. "Let me play Madden football, let me play EA Hockey. We'll put \$20 down, the winner gets \$15 and the house gets \$5."

It's an appealing idea for gamers, but unlikely to come to fruition because casinos make far more money when gamblers play against the house, as opposed to each other.

Skill will still only take you so far even with the new brand of slots. The flashing, singing machines — sometimes called "beautiful vaults" because they are the most profitable game a casino can put on its floor — are only marketable if they can retain a consistent portion of wagers, usually somewhere between 5 percent and 20 percent.

No matter how much of a joystick master a Centipede player may be, he or she will still have to get lucky to reach the bonus round.

Nevada regulators have seen an uptick in the number of slot machines incorporating skilled bonus rounds, according to Gaming Control Board engineer Joel Eickhoff. But the state will only approve games that are more slot machine than video game.

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