

## Slots get put to the test more quickly now at Division of Gaming Enforcement's lab

By DONALD WITTKOWSKI Staff Writer | Posted: Saturday, July 16, 2011 12:07 am

ATLANTIC CITY — The 5-cent slot machine in Eric Weiss' office is a virtual museum piece — a primitive, one-armed bandit controlled by mechanical reels that use fruits, bells and the traditional BAR symbols to indicate jackpots. The clunky, coin-operated device is similar to the type that gamblers played in the late 1970s, when Atlantic City's casino era began.

"They don't make them like that anymore," Weiss said, chuckling.

Slot-machine technology has been revolutionized in recent years by computer software, touch screens, vivid graphics, video streaming and high-end sound systems. In New Jersey, there also has been a revolution of sorts in how these sophisticated, interactive games are scrutinized at a state-run laboratory headed by Weiss.

Recent changes to New Jersey's gaming regulations have streamlined the process to greatly speed up the testing and approval time — from an average of 49 days in 2008 to 14 days now, Weiss said.

"That's what the lab has always been challenged with. How do we get technology on the floor as fast as possible without jeopardizing the integrity of the games?" he said.

Weiss is the director of the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement's Technical Services Bureau, which operates a slots lab recognized as one of the top facilities of its kind in the country. The lab serves as the central clearinghouse for Atlantic City's thousands of slot machines. The electronic games go through stringent testing and certification before they are allowed on the casino floor.

Although testing remains rigorous, gaming executives and slot-machine manufacturers agreed with Weiss that the regulatory reforms have made the process much friendlier and faster for Atlantic City's casinos.

"We have just had an amazing experience with getting our new community game, 'First Class Adventure Jackpot,' submitted, approved and on the floor at the Taj Mahal. The time frame was so quick for approvals and placement, it was unprecedented and allowed this game to be one of the first to market in the industry right here in New Jersey," said Aimee Schultz, marketing director for Pleasantville-based AC Coin & Slot, the only slot manufacturer on the East Coast.

Steve Callender, vice president of casino operations at Tropicana Casino and Resort, said casinos had disapproved of the arduously long testing process in the past. He said the delays made it

difficult to introduce the top slot themes while they were still hot.

“We had been frustrated by products being introduced in other gaming markets faster than they were here,” Callender said. “It took too long. But it’s been amazing how many changes they have been making lately. Now we’ll be able to get products on the floor faster.”

Tim Burke, vice president of slot operations at Borgata Hotel Casino & Spa, said the regulatory reforms include provisions that put “New Jersey first” for slot-machine development.

“This provides an incentive for these new games and products to be offered to our casinos first, and provides an opportunity for a competitive advantage over other gaming jurisdictions,” Burke said.

### **Avoiding fraud**

Overseeing the testing of slot machines is a huge job. Atlantic City’s 11 casinos have about 28,000 slot machines. Slots generated nearly \$2.5 billion in revenue in 2010, or close to 70 percent of Atlantic City’s \$3.6 billion gaming market.

The slots lab includes analysts, engineers, investigators, mathematicians, programmers and support staff. They tinker with the machines to make sure they work properly, including verifying the jackpot payout requirements. Moreover, they check the security safeguards that are incorporated into the computer software to prevent cheating scams.

“Today, everything is electronic. So if any software is changed, it will go into tilt mode,” Weiss explained of how the machines shut down if there is tampering.

In 2009, some slot swindlers were accused of ripping off a Pennsylvania casino for more than \$400,000 by manipulating the software. Similar scams occurred in Nevada. Weiss said Atlantic City’s casinos have avoided major cheating scandals, in large part because of the lab’s thorough testing procedures.

“We put our name on the line,” he said. “We put our name on everything.”

The lab features rows of slot machines. But while these machines flash their lights, play music, stream video and perform other functions just like their counterparts on the casino floor, they don’t pay out real jackpots.

Slot machine themes often mimic TV shows, movies, board games and cultural icons — everything from “Wheel of Fortune” and “Star Trek” to Monopoly and Playboy.

Movie titles are particularly popular, including “The Hangover,” the raunchy 2009 comedy set in Las Vegas. Afshien Lashkari, a senior engineer in the slots lab, demonstrated how “The Hangover” slot machine incorporates film clips using the main movie characters — Alan, Phil,

Stu and Doug — in each game.

“It creates multigames at one time on four separate screens,” Lashkari said.

The concept of “games within a game” is part of the high-tech evolution of slot machines. Gamblers are enticed by different betting options and bonus rounds that lead to bigger jackpots and add to the excitement.

“At the end of the day, they just want to get players playing as long as they possibly can,” Lashkari said of the slot manufacturers.

### **The future**

Interactive features ratchet up the entertainment quotient even more. On one slot machine undergoing tests in the lab, gamblers may touch the screen to “roll” the dice, almost like they are playing a real craps game.

Electronic table games featuring humanlike computer images appear to shuffle and deal the cards while talking to gamblers. Another popular innovation in recent years are the gigantic, communal slot machines that allow groups of gamblers to play at the same time.

The next generation of slot machines will be server-based, downloadable gaming. Weiss said casinos will be able to instantly change games through a software switch instead of going through the more laborious manual process that is done now.

With server-based games, slot themes could be tailor-made to fit the casino customers. For instance, the senior citizens who frequent the casinos during the day could play the penny slots, while the younger, bigger-spending night-time crowds could be given higher denominations on the same machine.

“Server-based games are the next step,” Weiss said. “New Jersey’s regulations are being rewritten to be more in line with Las Vegas. Then the manufacturers will submit the new games for testing here.”

What gamblers want most, of course, are the jackpots. Analysts in the slots lab scrutinize the machines to ensure they will give the 83 percent payoff required by law. Atlantic City’s slot machines must pay out 83 percent of what is wagered over the cycle of the game.

“The cumulative effect over time is 83 percent,” Weiss said. “Usually, it is within six years.”

Casinos have the option of making the payout percentage even better, or “looser” in gambling lingo.

But despite what scores of gamblers may believe, Weiss knows as well as anyone that there is no such thing as a “hot” or “cold” slot machine.

Jackpots are determined by something called a random-number generator, a tiny computer that controls where the reels stop during slot machine play.

"It's entirely the result of luck," Weiss said.

Contact Donald Wittkowski:

609-272-7258

DWittkowski@pressofac.com

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Engineer Afshien Lashkari, of Mays Landing, talks about slot technology at the New Jersey Division of Gaming Enforcement's slots laboratory.



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Eric Weiss, bureau administrator/laboratory director, of Hammonton, stands amid the gaming machines in the Division of Gaming Enforcement's lab.



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