

Lawmaker says virtual blackjack shouldn't stick

Less than a month after Pennsylvania's newest slots parlor – Hollywood Casino at Penn National outside Harrisburg – opened its doors, four machines have skyrocketed to stardom and become some of the casino's biggest moneymakers.

The machines feature a game many thought wouldn't see the inside of a Pennsylvania casino anytime soon: blackjack. Or, to be more precise, virtual blackjack.

While the traditional card game is banned at Pennsylvania casinos, where table games are forbidden, state gaming regulators have approved its electronic counterpart.

The machines – which allow five patrons to simultaneously play blackjack – have rapidly become one of the most popular pastimes at the state's fledgling slots parlors, leading casino operators and slot machine manufacturers to consider expanding their virtual offerings to other card games.

But some lawmakers say the virtual card games should never have been allowed and are asking the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board to remove them.

„This was not the intent of the law,“ state Sen. Pat Browne, R-Lehigh, said of the law legalizing slots. In addition to asking the board to remove the machines, Browne is circulating legislation calling for their prohibition.

„The clear and obvious intent of the Pennsylvania statute was no table gaming,“ he said.

The gaming board approved virtual blackjack in April 2007 and virtual three-card poker in October 2007. The machines are in six of the state's seven operating casinos.

Gaming board members say that although the games look different than other types of slot machines, they still qualify as slots.

„You’re not really playing blackjack. ...It’s basically a video game,“ board Chairwoman Mary DiGiacomo Colins said, adding, „there is a really complicated mathematical formula“ to define a slots machine.

Each blackjack machine has five stations, meaning five patrons can play at once, around one screen with an electronic dealer. Statewide, there are 53 machines with 265 stations, according to the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board. Each station or seat is considered an individual slot machine and counts toward a casino’s limit of 5,000 slot machines.

At Penn National, virtual blackjack games, which require a minimum wager of USD 10, have become so popular that the casino is tripling the 20 seats it has, said casino spokesman Fred Lipkin.

„They get good play,“ said Jim Wise, spokesman for Mohegan Sun at Pocono Downs, which has eight blackjack machines with 40 seats and requires USD 5 minimum wagers.

The games have been so popular the casino recently added two three-card poker machines, which also have five seats apiece.

„We added them for nothing more than product diversity and to see what people thought of it,“ Wise said.

The reason for their popularity, according to gaming experts, is that virtual card games appeal to table game players who may otherwise have little interest in slots.

„From what we’ve seen and what we’ve heard, they’re generating some appreciation among real table players.... I think it’s people who would generally gravitate toward tables,“ said Michael Pollock, managing director of Spectrum Gaming, a

gaming consultant company.

The electronic games are particularly popular in states such as Pennsylvania and Delaware, where table games are banned, but Pollock said they „are becoming a very important national product.“

In fact, Shuffle Master Inc., which makes the most popular version of virtual blackjack, says its machines are in casinos across the country, including table-game meccas Atlantic City and Las Vegas.

The games are appealing to full-fledged casinos because they are less labor-intensive – they don't require a dealer – and the casino operators can set the pace so they can be played more quickly than a traditional table game.

Novice players like them because they seem less intimidating than table games, Pollock said.

In most states, the games are categorized as slot machines, said Mark Yoseloff, Shuffle Master chairman and chief executive officer.

Although „what constitutes a slot machine in any particular jurisdiction differs from place to place,“ Yoseloff said, most states require the machines to meet a handful of criteria to be considered slots.

Typical standards, he said, require a machine to accept bets and make payouts. A machine must also be able to validate the money put into it, print tickets and generate random numbers.

According to the board's regulations, to be considered a slot machine, each player at a Shuffle Master game must have identical odds and probability regardless of player position and each seat must pay out the minimum payback percentage of 85 percent of everything bet.

The regulations also require that the actions of one slot

machine player have no affect on the actions of any other players.

As Penn National's Lipkin explained, „Your outcome is not based on the outcome of the other players at the table. Each game is an individual outlet.“

But Browne said that isn't any different from table games where dealers use card shuffling machines to ensure patrons don't count cards and essentially „play against the dealer rather than each other.“

Moreover, in a letter to other senators, he wrote, „The controlling factor in this matter is what casino patrons ...believe they are engaging in when they play the virtual game as opposed to the live table version. If patrons believe they are engaged in a blackjack game, they will participate accordingly and the fact that electronics is used to simulate the dealer and the card dealing process is irrelevant.“

Since Browne's letter went out this year, the gaming board has expressed an interest in a public education program to inform patrons of the differences between live and virtual blackjack games.

But that's not enough, said Dianne Berlin, coordinator of Casino Free PA.

„It is ludicrous. What comes to mind is the ...quote, ‚Don't pee on my leg and tell me it's raining. ...Don't do things that on the surface look like you're doing something',“ she said.

With a number of Pennsylvania legislators and casino industry lobbyists pushing for the state to allow traditional card games at its slots parlors, it's unclear how successful Browne's bill will be. There is no companion bill in the House at this point, but state Rep. Paul Clymer, R-Berks, intends to change that soon. He's already circulating a replica of Brown's bill through the House.

„Sounds like a fine bill to me,“ Clymer said. „I plan to copy Senator Browne’s bill and introduce it in the house as early as next week. Our law never intended games like these.“