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Robots never pee

G2E has seen the future of the casino industry -- and there won't be many inhabitants

BY DAVID MCKEE

A VENDOR'S SIGN ASKS, "Feet Ankles Knees Hips Back Hurt?" If your answer is "yes" to all of the above, you know you're at the Global Gaming Expo, which goes by the sci-fi-ish moniker of G2E. It's a three-day barrage of sensory and informational overload that took place Nov. 13-15 at the Las Vegas Convention Center.

It's also the one event around which everyone of consequence in the casino plans his or her year. From booth to booth, products are pitched and business is transacted in myriad languages. And if you can block out the mind-clouding pain born of pounding up and down the ankle-punishing floors of this vast Flatland of Babel, the Las Vegas Convention Center, you can glimpse the casino of the future.

Unlike the show, it apparently won't have many people in it.

Tasked with discussing "The State of the Industry," CEOs Gary Loveman and J. Terrence Lanni, of Harrah's Entertainment and MGM Mirage, respectively, spent the hour talking about Internet casinos. You'd never guess that their companies are in the process of spending untold billions to acquire or build casinos of the old-fashioned, brick-and-mortar variety. And if the word "Macau" was whispered, you'd have to have the ears of a cat to catch it.

"You could build a lot of Internet put-through for seven billion -- and build it a lot faster," Loveman said, referring to the cost of Lanni's projected north-Strip version of Project CityCenter.



PHOTO BY BILL HUGHES

Some parts of this "Shufflemaster babe" may be artificial, but she's no robot.



PHOTO BY BILL HUGHES

A hand-held gambling device quietly portends the destruction of American society as know it, or something.

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But as long as the U.S. government continues to spoil the fun by insisting that Internet gambling is illegal, U.S. casino moguls will have to find other new ways of making money. One of them may be coming to the Strip in a matter of weeks. Cantor Gaming, a branch of Wall Street financier Cantor Fitzgerald (which owns an Internet casino based in Malta), estimates it's a fortnight away from field trials of its handheld gambling devices at The Venetian.

Which means that if more than 2,000 slots and 100-plus table games just aren't enough to sate one's gambling jones, you can rent a PDA-like device slightly larger than an iPhone. On it, you'll be able to play roulette, blackjack, pai gow, sic bo, baccarat and slot facsimiles. It's all run off a server inside the casino and, should Nevada regulators approve it, these gizmos can eventually be played in any server-enabled "public area" in the casino. (A rival version is being developed in conjunction with The Palms.)

So, someday soon, the person next to you in the sports book, the bar or the pool could be wagering away with the dexterity of a text-messaging teenager. Or he could be doing it from the next seat in Phantom or The Pearl, depending on how much (or little) restraint casino owners show in terms of where they allow the devices to be played.

Nor is it clear how much demand actually exists for gambling on the go. Perhaps its sheer availability will bring demand into being. Then again, although mobile gambling is being pitched to the chronically lazy, it's not like you can flop on your hotel-room bed and deal up some baccarat ... yet.

Lest one imagine this ingenious little Venetian-in-a-box is a "gateway device" for legalized Internet gambling, Cantor Gaming Managing Director John Buyachek assures the listener that his companies' devices, anyway, can't be converted to that purpose. For Net bets, you'll have to stick with your cellphone, mate.

Although one reads and hears rumors of robotic beverage servers being deployed in Macau, to counter a labor shortage, if they exist they didn't put in an appearance at G2E. Which doesn't mean that other signs of imminent depersonalization weren't ubiquitous.

Aruze, chaired by Steve Wynn buddy Kazuo Okada, had Dealer's Angels, in which punters play against a creepy-looking, animated dealer who takes your money with a demonic smirk. Local firm Shufflemaster has its own, more sophisticated equivalent, which a company rep admits is for lower-end casinos, ones too cheap to employ dealers around the clock. Shufflemaster gets points for pulchritude as well as candor: Its crimson-gowned dealers were the sexiest to be seen. One couldn't say that for the plucky AR16, a made-in-Taiwan robot that can deal 40 hands of blackjack an hour. It's pure Jetsons.

"Someday you're going to go into a casino and there's not going to be any people in it," offered one jaded observer.

Canadian firm Playtrix goes one better and offers the quasi-surrealistic spectacle of players pushing buttons to lay bets and deal cards on an HDTV blackjack layout. It's dealer-despising Steve Wynn's ultimate wet dream come to fruition: Not only won't this dealer demand breaks, medical benefits, tips or even a minimum-wage salary, it's invisible and can even be thrown into the Dumpster when it wears out its welcome.

It's not all business: Sapphire gentleman's club rents out a tiny booth, complete with stripper pole. Uniform supplier Cintas (not to be mistaken for the shopworn Scintas, last seen hightailing it out of Rich Little's unfortunate Golden Nugget show) stages a runway fashion show. And slot-game producer Casino Technology has someone

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tickling the ivories of its pride and joy: PlayMe, a concert-sized piano with an embedded roulette wheel and five touch-screen betting stations.

Slots are still the G2E mainstay, though. International Game Technology continues to indiscriminately vacuum up concepts (its centerpiece was a behemoth eBay-themed slot). Prominently featured was a World Poker Tour-themed slot machine ... and an old-fangled reel-spinning slot, at that. Antonio "The Magician" Esfandiari and Scotty Nguyen are among the poker pros fronting this travesty.

For IGT, bigger is better. Its new Wheel of Fortune Super Spin is the size of a truck and the eBay machine is larger still. Rival WMS Gaming thinks small only in terms of bulk. Its 2007 offerings included a set of Star Trek slots whose video graphics arguably outdo the special effects of The Original Series -- and feature voice-overs by an execrably bad Scotty impersonator.

It's an apt choice of theme, though, as G2E's message to the world is akin to that of The Borg: You will be assimilated. Resistance. Is. Futile.

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