

My FAVORITE NEW GAMES

THE BEST MACHINES TO PLAY IN THE YEAR AHEAD

BY BOB DANCER

Every fall, the biggest gaming show in the world takes place in Las Vegas. All sorts of casino services and products are on display, from slot machines and coin sorters to uniforms, advertising agencies, chairs, light displays, new table games, consultants... the list goes on. Nobody could possibly evaluate everything at the show. Since my area of expertise is video poker, I limit my search to machine games of skill.

Before I actually play a game in a casino, I look at the pay schedule and try to determine whether or not I have the advantage when the game is combined with slot clubs and promotions. You can't do this at a gaming show. Usually a manufacturer provides four or five different pay schedules for each game, and it's up to the slot director at each casino to determine which one is appropriate for his casino.

For many of these machines, I'll provide articles in future issues dedicated to how to analyze the pay schedules and some pointers on proper play. But that's in the future. For now, I'm just looking at whether the games appear interesting to play. These are reviewed alphabetically by manufacturer.



Aristocrat

Aristocrat is an Australian gaming company which mostly creates slot machines. One video poker game that has some potential is called **CARD SHARKS**, based on the old television game show.

You can bet five coins for a “normal” video poker experience, or bet one or two additional coins for a chance at a randomly occurring bonus round that is linked to several machines.

Once in the bonus round, you will definitely collect one progressive bonus. You are shown a card and must determine whether the next card will be higher or lower. It’s not easy. If you’re shown a 4, for example, the smart play is to say the next card will be higher. You’ll win ten times out of twelve, but even with odds this good, sometimes you lose. Two misses and you get the lowest valued prize. Every correct guess gets you closer to one of the three higher bonuses.

Serious players will find nothing of interest here, but perhaps recreational players who remember the TV show will like it.



Bally Gaming

One game of skill that should be quite successful is **PONG**. It’s not video poker at all, but a rather typical, no-skill-required video slot machine. What makes it special is the bonus round, which is obtained by the right combination of scatter pays.

Once you reach this bonus round, you are playing the game of Pong. You remember... it’s the first video game ever, somewhat like a tennis match, and it burned its pattern into our TV sets before we learned about screen savers. In this version, you control one paddle and play up to 30 seconds against the machine, which is a so-so sort of opponent. Your score depends on how long you last and how many times the machine misses.

I will never play a video slot machine, but it’s refreshing to see fun skill elements added into a slot machine.

An interesting new video poker machine is called **ROYAL RUSH**. In this game you are given a choice. Whenever you draw two or three cards to a royal flush, you are allowed to pay for the option of drawing one card to a 4-card royal. For example, assume you start with the $K\clubsuit T\clubsuit 4\heartsuit 7\diamondsuit 3\clubsuit$. You may play the game normally (which would be to hold the K or the KT, depending on the game and pay schedule), or pay 20, 40, 60, 80, or 100 coins to start your hand with $K\clubsuit Q\clubsuit J\clubsuit T\clubsuit$. Betting 100 coins gives you a 1-in-45 chance at a 4,000-coin royal, a 1-in-45 chance at a 250-coin straight flush, a 7-in-45 chance to receive a 25-coin flush, and a 6-in-45 chance to receive a 20-coin flush.

If you’re going to take the royal rush option, it’s *never* a smart bet to invest less than 100 coins. At this level, you receive 40-for-1 for the royal, and at lesser levels, you receive only 25-for-1 for the royal (and nothing for high pairs). And don’t be on automatic pilot with this bet. If you are dealt $A\heartsuit A\clubsuit A\diamondsuit A\spadesuit J\heartsuit$, you can pay an extra 100 coins to draw to the suited AJ, but holding onto the four aces is a much smarter play. There are many choices that aren’t so obvious, so you’ll want to think about the possibilities before you invest.

International Game Technology

IGT owns something like 85 percent of the video poker market. At this show, IGT unveiled more games than anyone else. Some of these are improvements on old standards, and many are brand-new. Some of them will be hits, but it's hard to know up front which ones they will be. Here are my best guesses.

ACE INVADERS

This looks like a Triple Play game, but it's not. The bottom line is played normally, and the top two lines are dealt from different 52-card decks. The top two lines are stud games, which means there is no draw. What makes the game interesting is that aces from the top two lines fall into the lower two lines if it'll improve your score.

That's a simplified explanation, but the game is still a ways off. When it actually comes out, I'll give you a more complete set of rules and strategy rudiments.

What gives this game a chance for success is that many players love getting four aces. Here, you'll end up with a 250-coin four aces on the bottom line every 88 hands or so, and a 2,500-coin five aces every 1,700 hands or so.

ALL STAR POKER

This is not a game, but a game format. You can play any of the included games in a single play, Triple Play, Five Play, or Ten Play format. Game formats can include Double Pay Poker, Trade Up Poker, and Chase the Royal, plus others, and each of these formats may be played in a Jacks or Better, Bonus Poker, Deuces Wild, etc., game type. These are games from a few years ago that may not still be popular enough to justify a casino having a dedicated machine for them, but if a casino can bunch up several of these game types in one box, it's more likely you'll be able to find whichever ones you like in the casino.

BACK-IT-UP POKER

In this game, when you end up with a straight, flush, or 4-of-a-kind, the pay schedule on the very next hand gives you five times the normal amount if you can repeat. On a game like Jacks or Better, where the biggest amount you are quintupling is 125 coins, this doesn't require much adjustment to the pay schedule. In a game like Double Double Bonus, where you are occasionally quintupling 2,000 coins, the pay schedule has to change a lot to allow for this.

BIG SPLIT

This is an 8-card video poker game reminiscent of the table game, pai gow poker. You divide the game into a 3-card hand and a 5-card hand. There is definitely skill involved, but it's not that complicated, and you don't have to memorize a strategy. Although the return depends on the pay schedule, the strategy doesn't.

BIG TIMES DRAW POKER

This is a game found in Triple Play, Five Play, and Ten Play versions, where you bet ten coins per line. You are paid five coins per line, multiplied by a 1x to 10x factor determined by the highest ranking card in the original hand. With aces counting as low card, if you receive a king and/or a queen in the hand, the multiplier is 1. If your entire hand consists of aces and deuces (either a full house or a 4-of-a-kind with a kicker), your hand is multiplied by 10.

The good news about this game is that there are no strategy adjustments. If you know how to play regular 9/6 Jacks or Better, for example, you know how to play 9/6 Jacks or Better Big Times. (This makes the game similar to SUPER TIMES PAY, a game beginning to appear all over the country to enthusiastic reviews.) Another good point is that the highest multiplier is on the highest scoring hands.

BONUS HAND POKER

In this game, you receive three extra hands immediately following dealt straights, flushes, and 4-of-a-kinds. You "pay for" this bonus by receiving 10 coins for 3-of-a-kind rather than 15 (which in the Jacks or Better and Bonus Poker versions, for example, mean you hold inside straights like 2h 4s 5d 6c rather than throwing them away).



DRAW 6 POKER

Whenever you are dealt a 3-of-a-kind, you receive three extra cards rather than two. This increases your chance of ending up with 4-of-a-kind. This will be a better-than-usual play where casinos are offering a "card of the day" promotion, where four sevens, for example, receive a bonus of 100 coins or so.

FIVE PLAY MULTI STRIKE

This game combines Multi Strike with Five Play, and the result is a winner. The major problem with single-line Multi Strike is that it is very streaky due to the fact that you only reach the top line once every eight hands. In this version, you reach the top line at least once every other game, on average.

GOING FOR FOURS

When you end up with a 3-of-a-kind (and in some games certain full houses), you'll receive the option of paying additional coins to draw two additional cards to complete the 4-of-a-kind. The price you pay depends on how much the 4-of-a-kind is worth. In general, it is *always* a good idea to pay the price, and if you're not planning to do this, play another game.

HOLD'EM CHALLENGE

This has been out for some time but is becoming a much bigger attraction due to the popularity of hold'em poker on television. I actually expected some sort of hold'em poker variation to be shown by every manufacturer due to this television phenomenon, but I guess it takes longer than I thought to develop a game. I'm willing to bet that in the 2005 show, we'll see more video versions of hold'em poker. Any takers?

MAX OUT POKER

In this game you bet eight coins and play it like a 4-line version of Triple Play. What is different is that five coins are bet on the base game, and one coin is bet on each of the top three lines. Unlike normal Triple Play games, the pay schedule on the upper three lines is different from the pay schedule on the base game. On a Jacks or Better base game, for instance, the upper lines will not pay you for any pair, but instead will increase your pay for 4-of-a-kinds and royal flushes. Correct strategy requires using some sort of weighted average between the different pay schedules.

PICK-A-PAIR POKER

This is the IGT version of the classic Bally game, Pick'em Poker. It remains a game of restricted choice, where you must keep the first two cards dealt and choose between two different cards to improve the hand. It is now available with several different pay schedules in Triple Play, Five Play, and Ten Play versions.



Konami

The parent company of Konami is based in Japan, and is a well-known producer of arcade games. A relatively recent entrant in the United States gaming market, currently most of its offerings are slot machines. They do have some video poker, including several with sequential royal bonuses, and some of what they have is interesting.

SQUILLION DOLLAR VIDEO POKER

The base game is fairly straightforward, but when you get a 4-of-a-kind, you enter a luck-only bonus round. You select any card in the deck and you get up to two chances to match either the suit (12 out of 51 cards will do this) or the rank (3 out of 51 cards will do this). Having two chances at one of the 15 cards succeeds slightly more than 50 percent of the time.

Passing this test the first four times yields you a rather modest bonus of 50 coins each. Then the bonus increases dramatically. If you can win nine of these tests in a row (about 500 to 1 against you), you receive a 4,000-coin bonus.



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Mikohn Gaming

HEADS UP POKER

This is an interesting game where the player plays both video poker and live poker against the machine. This game has been bouncing around for a few years.

Mikohn bought the rights to it but appeared to abandon it last year.

This year, with the emergence of televised live poker, the game is back. I liked it when I first saw it three years ago, and I still like it.



WMS Gaming

It's been a year since WMS introduced its new "Bluebird" box. While it's likely that IGT can do everything with its box that WMS can do with theirs, so far WMS uses more colors and sounds in their video poker games than IGT does.

REEL'EM IN POKER

This game was introduced at last year's show. You sometimes receive a "Go Fish" card, and when you do, you have a choice of any of the next seven cards you see, although once you pass on a card, you can't go back. The exact strategy is not simple, as the probability of getting flushes, straights, and other paying combinations changes with every card seen. As a professional player (and not a fisherman), I found the fishing-themed sound effects annoying. Occasional players may well find these effects charming.

MULTI-PAY POKER

This is a game that used to be featured on older WMS machines, but it now makes a reemergence on the new box. What makes this game unique is that you get paid for multiple hands in the same five cards. Let's say you end up with a KKKAA full house and you're playing a game based on 8/5 Jacks or Better game (which is short-paid to a Kings or Better game). You'll get paid 40 for the full house, 15 for the 3-of-a-kind, 10 for two pair, and 5 for a high pair. (Technically, you'd like to be paid for two separate high pairs, but the game doesn't work that way. Don't sweat it. You don't receive two pair aces and kings very often, and you only lose out on five coins when you do.) ●