

Don't Think Your Casino Is At Risk?

Before you say you've got card counters figured out, read more

By Eliot Jacobson, Ph.D.



Recently, I've been looking at a lot of new proprietary games for game protection weaknesses. I've long been interested in this subject, dating back to my decade of play as an advantage player. But now it's just getting downright silly. Every time I turn around, I find another game with a weakness. There's hardly enough time to write the articles or do

the analysis to keep up with the opportunities. If I had started my play today instead of in the haze of card counting smoky, single deck games, I may have stayed the course. Instead, it has become an avocation to track these things down and figure them out. What's clear is that the situation is becoming more complicated all the time.

For decades, the light of game protection has been focused on blackjack card counters. Dealers, supervisors, and management center their attention on the game that comprises the bulk of the tables and the bulk of the vulnerability. Maybe there's good reason for this. The phrase "blackjack card counting" returned 966,000 pages when I did a Google search. The online retailer Amazon lists 311 books on blackjack card counting. The average gambler, when asked if there is any way to beat a casino, can recite "card counting" without skipping a beat, while admitting that you have to be really smart to keep track of all those cards (bzzzt), and that you can't count a shoe anyway (bzzzt). Among the many movies featuring card counting are "Vegas Vacation," "Rainman," "21," and "The Hangover." A shift supervisor recently told me that the counters were each taking \$500 to \$700 a night from them (no way!). One casino I visited had an absurd policy to deal only one round from the single deck 6/5 game as protection against counting. It's hard to get your mind off of card counting when information and discussion about it comes at you from everywhere.

While blackjack remains the center of the universe for game protection, management has long been aware of other serious issues. Baccarat, roulette, and craps each have their own list of well known weaknesses. However, the modern pit is changing. Often there are more proprietary games in the casino, in total, than there are traditional tables. As for these new games, very little is known about their vulnerabilities. For most

of these games, issues like card counting, shuffle tracking, and hole carding have not been investigated or quantified.

In the beginning, proprietary games were given a complete pass in game protection. The first indication that something funny was going on came in the early 2000's when Three Card Poker started getting hammered by hole card players. As soon as Shuffle Master was made aware of the problem, they informed casino management of procedural and game protection options. Later, they introduced a new shuffler to assist in game protection. However, many strong advantage players began their careers playing against this game.

By way of comparison with blackjack, Amazon lists only six books that discuss Three Card Poker, and only half of those discuss hole carding the game. But times have changed and Three Card Poker is yesterday's news. With the explosion of new proprietary games and side bets, a much bigger edge is easy to find.

You read that correctly – a much bigger edge is easy to find. Almost every casino I visit offers one or more proprietary games or side bets that can be hammered, if the conditions are right, in ways that blackjack card counters could only dream about. For the most part, casino management knows this may be happening, but they have no direct knowledge of the protection problems, and nowhere to turn to find critical information about them. The chain of responsibility doesn't have a link that can be relied on to uncover game protection issues. From the game inventor to its manufacturer to the licensing authority to the distributor to the director of table games to supervisors and pit staff to surveillance to the dealers, there is no one whose job it is to fairly judge the weaknesses of proprietary games and side bets, and honestly report them.

Having game protection weaknesses hurts the bottom line in another way – through the marketing department. Advantage players are usually some of the biggest bettors, generating the greatest THEO. For these players, there is nothing quite as nice to inspire big bets as playing with a big, juicy edge over a casino. After a few sessions, the advantage player is getting comped rooms, shows, and first-rate meals. In a few weeks, those mailer offers with free play and match play coupons start arriving. When reacquisition marketing kicks in, the advantage player gets a second wave of free stuff. Advantage players boast about their comps with pride, in many cases holding them up as victory trophies.

The success of the MIT blackjack teams of the 1990's showed advantage players that publicity for the methods they use is not a good thing. Modern advantage players keep their discoveries secret. Ways of beating proprietary games are rarely discussed on forums or message boards. There are no books or how-to manuals. Amazon and Google each give zero hits. There is no movie featuring a hole card team beating a modern casino table game. New vulnerabilities are shared among select groups with carefully guarded privacy. Casino management is rightfully suspicious and hungry for answers.

My advice is to first deal with the games already in your casino. Use the mindset of an advantage player to ask yourself if the game can be beaten. Be flexible and open minded and assume the answer is always yes. Don't be afraid of a game just because you find a weakness. The problem may be small. There may be an easy fix. There may be far more serious problems that need your attention. With this information, create improvements to your policies and procedures, revise the equipment and layout if necessary, and educate your staff.

Next, don't put in a new game until you are satisfied that you fully understand it. Along the way, ask the vendor a few questions. Is the game vulnerable to advantage play? How? What should you do to protect it? What have others done to protect it? What are the "tells" that indicate something funny might be going on? What operational issues have other casinos had with the game? Ask the vendor to demonstrate to you that they have done their due diligence. Most have not.

Casino management knows there are issues, but has no way of putting these vulnerabilities in relative terms. All weaknesses are treated equally. It is much easier to take out a game with a known weakness than to consider the potential weaknesses of every game and take appropriate relative actions. Overreaction is common. It is precisely for these reasons that the focus remains on blackjack. The game of blackjack is known. Its vulnerabilities are well documented. Game protection for it is understood. It is straight forward to catch card counters. But as long as the spotlight remains on blackjack, no real progress is being made. It's time to take that spotlight off of blackjack and let it shine on all your games.

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