

Slot machines resemble video games

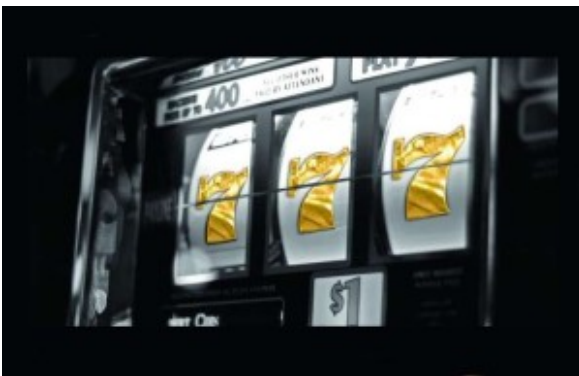
By Ed Komenda, Las Vegas Sun

Ask Bill Wadleigh about serendipity in the slot business, and he'll say it's sometimes as simple as spinning the wheel of a toy car.

That's how the game designer came up with a spinning bonus graphic for his forthcoming NASCAR game.

"We'll just make a tire a wheel," Wadleigh recalled thinking. "Wheels are very attune to gambling."

But he'll also tell you his NASCAR game is much more than just wheels and reels.



Slot machines are no longer as simple as lining up 7s.
Photo/Bally's

"It is a video game," Wadleigh said.

Wadleigh, a transplant from the video game industry and head of development at Bally Technologies, has found himself moving closer and closer to his roots these days. Bally and many other slot machine makers are beginning to bridge the gap between traditional spin slots and immersive video games.

“From a technological standpoint, on a slot machine, it’s pretty insane,” Wadleigh said. “Insane in a good way.”

The most immersive slot machines, such as NASCAR, have gone beyond simple player-character interaction. Equipped with complex math, high-quality video cards and 3D engines, the machines put gamblers in scenarios they can control, much like the video games made popular by Sony’s Playstation and Microsoft’s Xbox.

Tap the spin button on NASCAR and strike the “U-Race” bonus, and suddenly you’re transported to the first lap of a three-lap race at Daytona. The character you chose at the beginning of the game – either Dale Earnhardt Jr., Jeff Gordon, Jimmie Johnson or Kevin Harvick – sits in the driver’s seat, but you’re in control.

A cluster of arrows pops up on the screen: left, right or straight ahead. Your choice dictates the driver’s decision.

Tap the right arrow, and the voice of your driver responds: “I can pass on the high side!” And that’s what he does.

Tap the forward arrow, and the driver confidently pipes up, “I’m going for the lead!” The car pulls ahead, taking the lead.

When your car crosses the finish line, the driver thanks you. “Couldn’t have done it without you!” he says.

It’s not always that easy, of course. You don’t win every race. But with every choice, there’s money to be made. That’s the beauty of a bonus.

Wadleigh says the possibility of landing in a race or other high-quality bonus scenario keeps players interested and coming back for more – a slot machine’s ultimate goal and measure of success.

“We’re out to find something that’s compelling to a player,”

Wadleigh said. "And not just compelling once, but a repeatable event that has a lot of different variety in it."

There are more than 853,000 electronic gaming machines in the United States, according to the American Gaming Association. Nevada has the most, more than 178,000. Nationally, the casino industry makes 62 percent of its revenue from slot machines.

Slot makers spend a lot of money – sometimes millions – paying for licensing fees and developing character-driven games based on pop stars, movies and television shows.

"(We want to) bring something new and exciting," Wadleigh said. "It can be a subtle or incremental change, or it could be a vastly radical one."

Take Pawn Stars, for example.

The Bally game offers players a chance to virtually do business with the characters made famous by the History Channel show.

Roll the Rick bonus, and up pops the show's deal-savvy leader, Rick Harrison. The game gives you a chance to sell him a rare gas pump from the 1930s.

The item intrigues Rick, and he offers an interesting fact: it was invented in 1885.

But Rick is skeptical. He doesn't know if the item is authentic, so he asks if you'd like him to call an expert. You tap the "Call an Expert" option, and Rick calls.

After a beat, you have your answer: "Sorry, my expert said it's a reproduction. ... Thanks for stopping by my shop."

And you're bum out of luck.

Roll the Old Man bonus, and Richard Harrison appears: "So, what do we have here?"

In this case, it's an acoustic guitar from the 1970s. The old man takes a moment to examine it. You make him an offer, he counters and you accept. You win the amount he offered – \$170.

One of IGT's most innovative games is CSI.

Cari Bloomquist, the game's lead producer, started pondering the mechanics of the game shortly after the license landed on her desk.

After two years of development with a team of 15 people, including engineers, 3D artists and mathematicians, the CSI slot machine moved to the casino floor. It's now one of the most successful slots in the company's repertoire.

Players first choose one of three cities: Miami, New York or Las Vegas.

If you sit long enough to hit a crime scene bonus, you're transported to a murder scene where a lifeless body is spread across the floor. Glowing dots are strung across the scene, marking different clues, such as a bloody hand print. You get to pick five, each attached to bonus payout. The game analyzes the clue and reveals how much you've won.

"They're looking for a suspect," said Bloomquist, who has been working in the slot business for 18 years. "Slots have changed a lot since I came to the business."

While slot players ultimately want to make money, experts say video game technology has made losing more fun.

"It's all just a dressing for a traditional slot machine," said Daniel Sahl, a sociology instructor at UNLV who has been studying the connection between slot machines and video games for the past three years. "People are still playing to win money. ... The immersive elements make it more meaningful."

The math behind the games hasn't changed much. If they play long enough, gamblers typically can earn an 88 to 98 percent

return on their money. So, for every \$100 a player pumps into a machine, they'd lose between \$2 and \$12.

The real reward comes with winning a bonus. But players have to sit at a machine long enough to earn the chance to race a stock car, investigate a crime scene or sell an item to the Pawn Stars. That chance doesn't come every round.

Sahl said immersive bonuses have helped improve the image of slot machines, which more than half of all gamblers call their favorite form of gaming.

"Some people think slots are these devious machines designed to inflict suffering," Sahl said. "Players now want to use that virtual world as a conduit for play."

Some bonuses are much more simple.

In the Queen of Hearts bonus in WMS' Alice In Wonderland, a queen pops on screen to turn a losing bet into a winning one or a weaker bet into a stronger one.

The Smooth Criminal bonus of Bally's Michael Jackson slot gives players a virtual concert experience. The chair is equipped with surround sound that pumps Jackson's famous tunes as a digital image of the singer moonwalks across the screen.

"It's so much more than hitting 7-7-7," Sahl said. "(Manufacturers) are doing an amazing job tapping into the cultures people love."