Server Based Downloadable Games  
Technology of the Future

A n emerging technology promises to change the way gaming machines are played and the way slot floors are operated – server based downloadable gaming. This revolutionary technology enables slot machine terminals to download games from a central server, allowing gaming terminals to offer multiple titles. Server based downloadable gaming carries numerous benefits for both players and operators, such as personalizing a game’s features and enhanced marketing offers. Several in the industry are predicting that this will be the next step in the evolution of gaming technology. Indian Gaming magazine recently discussed this exciting new technology with representatives from four of the industry’s leading game manufacturers.

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“We are looking at this as a technology that could revolutionize the casino floor.”

Server based gaming stands to be the next replacement cycle, which will bode well for a lot of different manufacturers. We’re eagerly awaiting the implications of the current field tests that are going on with other companies and we have a lot of initiatives underway in-house that are planning for this next replacement cycle.

Our whole development philosophy is built around player-driven innovation, or PDI. We are looking to use this technology in a way that enhances the experience for the player. While definitely paying attention to all the potential benefits to the operator, whether they be increasing the distribution of content on their floor in a rapid manner or reducing labor or playing with different configurations on their floor, we are looking at this as a way to increase the gaming experience for the player. Only at that time will the technology take off. We have had a lot of different interaction with many tribal entities and other customers to understand how they envision this technology being part of their floor.

It’s hard to project whether this technology will flourish in the tribal gaming industry before the commercial industry. Ticket in/ticket out technology was basically adopted by Native American casinos first. Knowing that they have very captive markets and huge occupancy on their floors, you could argue that some of the benefits of server based gaming bode much better for Native American customers.

Many of the customers that have purchased products from us in the last few years can upgrade their existing games to facilitate whatever technology is accepted. A lot of the functionality that people are looking to utilize with server based gaming can be provided in our cabinet as it exists today. Our cabinet gives us an advantage in that we were working with a premium class processor with a lot of different components that can facilitate certain types of server based gaming today. There is a lot of efficiency when it comes to delivering new titles. There is going to be a greater need for more bandwidth and a larger quantity of available games.

This technology is going to require that the operators and manufacturers work closely together. If you give all of the operators this technology without any tools that allow them to monitor who’s playing what and at what time, it’s a potential problem. The true winners are going to be the operators that work with the manufacturers on how the technology is formulated.

We do a lot of testing to determine what the next big thing is that players want. We have initiatives underway to change the content and experiences of these games based on how loyal customers are to a particular casino or rewards program.

Server based gaming opens up a ton of different opportunities. Look at the success the Internet has had in the last five years just in giving people options to customize their browsers and allowing them to do things they could never do before in the convenience of their homes. Networking games opens up a similar portal for the casino environment. The gaming experience will definitely change. It’s an exciting time for the industry.
“Ultimately, this technology will allow changes to be made to the game content or configuration without having to send a technician to the floor. This is the core function that has to be in place before we can begin attaching other technologies to it.”

What we’re doing with server based gaming is exploring how this technology can be used to help operators manage their floor as well as enhance the playing experience for the player. There are currently games that use servers for various functions, such as Class II gaming. A lot of the patron management and CRM functions also use servers. Even some of the new group gaming type of games use servers. The industry has been using servers and server technology for quite some time.

We are also looking at how we can use this technology to enhance securities and provide uses for regulators. We feel there is a value here for everyone involved. We are moving in a phased approach, the first phase of which is experimenting with downloading game binaries from the server to the machine. This is a core functionality, but even in doing something like this a lot has to happen in terms of fusing this technology with existing systems.

We can make adjustments to the machine itself, such as replacing the static glass in the box with digital glass so that the glass can be changed along with the game theme. We are working on making some dynamic changes to the buttons, as well. Soon changing the look and feel of the machine, whether or not it’s an entire game content change, will be a hands-off operation.

The machine itself will still have the same securities in place. The machine can still be opened and the contents verified, but this can now be done from a server, as well, which can be appealing to a regulator. The system can even report back any changes that have been made, so there is visibility there too.

The next phase is to look at the players and determine how we can offer them something new. We will look at how we can change from a downloadable game to a personalized game, giving players the games they want on any machine. Those games will have all of the functionality they’re used to seeing, but with some new features. We can add new bonus options, new customizations, and ultimately anything that the server can deliver. We can do this by integrating these systems with player profiles, so the system will recognize a player. There is also the ability to link machines for group play so people can really experience something different.

The technology can link with player tracking systems to enable personalization. We certainly understand that there are a lot of player tracking systems out there and that the technology is going to have to work with them. If the machine is linked to the tracking system and can tell who the player is, then through the system and hardware, such as the advanced video platform that IGT is introducing, we can enable the games that player likes. This feature would allow the player to move about the floor as they like.

In a lot of ways this technology will be like ticket in/ticket out. Initially people thought it was great because they no longer had to do as much on the floor. What that technology really did, though, was enable things like penny games, which players loved because they didn’t have to carry all of those coins. Server based gaming will create a similar appeal that is going to drive it across the floor.

Tournaments are among the many things that can be layered onto this system. You can use the system to enable and disable tournament machines, but you can also expand it to accommodate more people at different places on the floor. The tournaments won’t necessarily have to be held in the same bank anymore, which can be a lot more exciting. In that sense, this could draw the attention of those sitting next to the tournament players. It could also draw more attention to player’s clubs and help build more loyalty at properties. It could potentially engage more players in group play, as well.

From an operator’s standpoint, this technology allows machines to download things other than just content changes. If a customer notification comes out and affects machines on the floor, the system can recognize what has to be checked. The system can check when the machines are out of play, make the fix automatically, and put the machine back into play.

We’re also developing a full loop system for online ordering. Operators can just plug in a secure key and password to access and purchase games. This way they can get games tomorrow on a disk or through downloading rather than waiting for weeks. This technology is really only limited by the ideas vendors and operators can come up with, and by what the regulators approve.
Gaming has the same objective no matter what kind of gaming it is, and that is to maximize the amount of entertainment value for the customer. The goal is to give them more time in the chair and make money in the process.

As things have evolved over time, the line between Class III gaming and Class II gaming has become blurred. The games look the same, they play the same, and the players can’t tell the difference except for a few moderate differences at the heart of the game. Because of ticket in/ticket out, cash in/ticket out, player tracking, all of those ancillary functions for a gaming device remain the same. What customers want is maximum flexibility with low cost and without a lot of difficulty in managing their gaming floor and the ability to make whatever changes are necessary. The easiest of those is game changes to maximize play.

The ability to change games quickly and efficiently - even to meet seasonal interests such as Valentine’s Day or Halloween - without it being expensive or time-consuming is something that most slot floor managers would like to have. Thus, downloadable gaming is an exciting and effective solution.

We created the Evolution server based gaming system for this purpose. It delivers downloadable games with all of the popular features. But at its heart there are different personality modules that correlate to specific gaming markets. For those in a Class II market, we have a Class II gaming engine that follows all of the rules for Class II gaming as it’s currently defined. For those in a Class III market, we change the personality module to fit those requirements. With the Evolution gaming system, we can deliver Class II, standard Class III gaming, charity bingo, etc.

The player terminal has a similar appearance to other high quality Class II and Class III gaming devices. It uses the same bill acceptors, ticket acceptors, mag card readers and ticket printers that you’d find on slot machines in Las Vegas. The server based software and the flexibility it offers allows for a networked floor that delivers all of the same features, such as player tracking, but allows games to be changed directly from the server. The belly glass and top glass still have to be changed out for cosmetic reasons, but that’s all it takes. Operators don’t have to buy anything new.

Games don’t have to be changed by an entire bank - they can be changed one game at a time. Every game on the floor can be changed independently. Floors can place a penny game in a bank right next to a dollar game. They don’t have to be categorized by denominations and can even be entirely different kinds of games. They can be 5-reelers, 3-reelers, even keno.

With respect to regulation, we play within the rules, but sometimes the rules are a little difficult to interpret. We happen to believe that the final decision maker on that issue is the gaming commissioner for the tribe. The tribe has the right to make that choice. Some will only run an NIGC-approved game, some will run games they believe should be approved by the NIGC. Whatever they have determined to be within their sovereign rights, defined by IGRA, we can provide it, giving them maximum flexibility within the framework of the law.

The objective is to make it easy for the casino to operate the way they believe is best for their property and their players. With the Evolution gaming system, not only can you quickly change from one game to another, but you can even change from Class II to compact games. With this technology the only time properties would have to replace the boxes is if the players wear them out.

Properties want to be able to engage their players directly, to recognize when they’re on player terminals, and to communicate to them directly on the machine itself. They can’t do this without a server. The technology is also there to apply this to multiple locations, such as properties with satellite locations. One property in Minnesota has ten sites all linked to one server for reporting systems.

Properties change out about 20 percent of their floor each year in terms of game titles. This is rather expensive if you’re on the traditional game delivery system. Server based downloadable recovers those costs very quickly, so that 20 percent can be added to the bottom line. Your ability to manage the floor is also enhanced dramatically. Recently, we were able to change the game mix at a particular location. The daily holds for the following week increased fourfold.

We are about attracting, winning and keeping players. They’re the ones that vote. We think of the casino operators as our customers, but the fact of the matter is our customer is the guy that walks in the front door with money in his pocket looking to have a good time. If he likes your games, it will be reflected in the daily holds.
“Server based technology will allow operators to plan their floors for certain demographics. It will allow them to adjust to their players as well as give them greater control over their floor.”

Server based technology makes electronic gaming machines function like any other computer system. To utilize this technology, a high-speed floor network is needed. The game terminals receive new content, graphics, pay tables and updates from a central server. Any configuration that can be done at the machine level can be done from a central server. Operators can use the central server to configure and adjust floors to their players.

With downloading capabilities, managers can adjust the floor to their clientele. It’s also great from a vendor’s point of view because if floors have a certain number of downloadable boxes on the floor, we can just send them a disk of the game and they can load onto their server and distribute as many copies as they need on the floor.

This really opens the door for the speed of getting software to the market as well as standardizing and maintaining your floor. For example, every time a new bill comes out, the firmware for bill validators needs to be updated. Now that firmware can be out on the floor at a much faster rate.

We’re trying to provide tournament functionality in our system as well. For tournaments today operators will order an additional 20 to 50 machines and place them somewhere away from the floor for the event. It’s a very tedious process when what you really want to do is have people go out there and start playing. With our tournament module, we’re automating the whole process to make it much more user friendly for operators, allowing them to quickly set up tournament play.

In terms of maintenance, there have been horror stories of new properties opening with game configurations incorrectly set. With a new standardized system, those kinds of problems will be eliminated. In some jurisdictions, games are revoked all of the time. With this new technology, regulators and operators will be able to run a query for all of the machines running a particular game, and if needed, there will be another version of an approved game sitting on the server that can be swapped right out. Manufacturers will no longer have to send out loads and loads of chips for operators to change out.

There are several system products that currently recognize customers by their player’s club card. With server based gaming it is technologically possible to give the player the games we know he or she likes to play. All of the vendors will still have their respective machines and respective positions on the floor, but operators will have a new level of control over what is played.

We are heavily utilizing Gaming Standard Association (GSA) protocols. Many members of our team are involved with GSA and with the introduction of some of these new protocols. We’re taking a serious look at how we can help to get them to the market and make sure they’re being utilized.

Server based gaming is the direction we are moving in and the industry is as well. We believe it is going to be the next big thing. The last revolution was ticket printers and we think this is as big, if not bigger, than that.”