

A GREAT SOCIAL EXPERIMENT

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While America is known as the ‘Great Experiment’, one can view Las Vegas to be America’s great ‘Social Experiment.’ Whether a person plans their visit around gambling, eating at a restaurant, or catching a show, the notion of being in a crowd and part of the infamous lively environment was acknowledged and accepted. So, what happens when a global pandemic impacting every industry in an extreme way hits the city’s deep-rooted industry? Shock and disbelief, at first. Then panic and anger follow. The realization that the very nature of what made Las Vegas the entertainment capital of the world is also a major way a deadly and infectious virus is spread can stop the entire economy right in its tracks.

Just as in the days following 9/11, airport security ramped up protocols to extremely high levels to meet the increased safety need. Travelers were outraged, inconvenienced, and annoyed, yet accepted the fact that these precautions needed to be met to get on the plane. Almost 20 years later, and while the airport screening experience isn’t as extreme as it once was, the industry has found an acceptable, non-invasive way to continue to monitor for safety without sacrificing customer experience through programs such as TSA pre-check or Clear.

Before COVID-19 hit, the gaming industry was already swirling around a very important topic—the Future of Gaming—trying to analyze, understand, and come up with new ways to extend the lifeline of a gambler into the Millennial generation. If you went to every gaming conference anywhere in the world, there would be a session (or entire circuits) dedicated to Millennials. The discourse became almost obsessed with labeling that generation with expectations, rather than actualities. I, myself, am a Millennial. Yet, I rarely found many people my age engaged in these discussions and panels which I found concerning. My generation is beyond assumptions that

everything needs to be digital and accessed on a smart device. A popular fallback subject was that eSports was the wave of the new casino. While there is money to be made in that market, the entire culture and experience of their events is only a distant cousin of the casino experience. Without diving too deep into the eSports world, the type of interaction can be described as focused and intentional while the casino universe centers around interaction and a game of chance. *The natural high of the flip of a playing card matches that of a simple scratch ticket from the corner store – and that is where the gold lies. The Future of Gaming rested in the expectations of a guest who prefers a more social experience at a high-energy craps table over the mass stock option of a branded slot machine.*

Understanding that fundamental aspect of guest engagement in a casino is important to fully accept our current situation and reimagine it. Stripping away slot chairs and adding acrylic barriers is short-sighted and antithetical to solving the challenge at hand. The world has effectively changed. It is our responsibility to accept that and acknowledge our role, as designers, to set the direction of that change. How do we, in a post-COVID world, continue to enjoy high-contact environments and engage with other guests while respecting social distancing and be hyper aware of cleanliness at the same time?

Taking inventory of the current floor and finding areas of inefficiencies is a start.



The gaming floor always flourished more in a layout where slot rows and circulation runways are replaced with winding paths and gaming neighborhoods, ultimately creating unique experiences and zones under the overall gaming umbrella. Slot spacing would grow to allow social distancing to occur, but to also make room to weave other environmental elements to enhance the vibe, via the concept of biophilia, for example. Bringing the outside in and pushing the inside out is a strong concept that has yet to be fully committed to. Perhaps in a post-pandemic world, now is the opportunity to draw the gaming floor outside and integrate that experience with another exciting setting.

Finding ways to integrate evolving self-cleaning technology into the existing gambling format is also a worthy avenue to explore. Getting down to the high-touch points of a casino, it all starts with the tables. Utilizing UV technologies to become an additive component of a table game is just the beginning of how we, as part of the industry, can effectively reimagine being able to play while maintaining the acceptable level of sanitation.

Pandemic or not, these social environments are not going away, but they do need to evolve. They need to think inclusively of the elements we can design to support the new reality we face. To begin to address our current and future challenges in the gaming industry, our approach needs to stem from the same ideals that brought the industry success—creative risk. After all, the Las Vegas legacy started as a social experiment and it is only fitting to continue to blaze that path. ■