Leveraging the Massive Popularity of Poker
Transforming Skill Games into Games of Chance

By Amir Sadri, Senior Director, Game Development & Analysis, GTECH

It is as pervasive as anything in popular culture today. Poker is as ubiquitous as it is popular – with industry estimates of 50 million people in the United States and more than 150 million people worldwide considering themselves "regular" poker players, according to the New York Times. Turn on a television on any given night in the United States and you are bound to find the game televised. Leading networks like ESPN, Bravo, the E! Channel, the Travel Channel and countless others televise it – in prime time – all year long, supported by the upwards of seven "official" organizations that sponsor tournaments of all kinds all over the globe.

The obvious popularity of poker has been harnessed by the lottery industry in a number of branded Instant formats. But those efforts capitalize only on the spirit associated with the brands that have spawned by the sport. The true essence of poker – the social aspect of the game and the element of skill – can only be captured in the more dynamic online lottery world, where graphics and varied play styles and distribution channels can morph the lottery into a more entertainment-based experience for players.

But how does a lottery create a dynamic play experience that looks, acts and feels like the immensely popular Texas Hold 'em poker? How can the quintessentially popular game of skill be transformed into a game of chance required for the online lottery industry? For GTECH Marketing, those questions led to the development of Club Poker™, a breakthrough patent-pending online poker game designed for monitor play in social spaces.

"In its simplest form, we found that we had to invert the game to allow the game to play itself out as it normally would," said Thomas Napolitano, Senior Manager of Game Design at GTECH. Because the game is aimed at people who watch poker on television, it is crucial that the game accurately reflect the game play. In so doing, Club Poker attracts players who might otherwise not be interested in the lottery, but are drawn to it by the game they follow passionately. *"It is an important strategy in enhancing the game portfolio for lotteries who are seeking to optimize revenue and expand their sales base, as well as to attract new players to the industry without cannibalizing the existing player base,"* said Napolitano.

"The game was developed on GTECH's 3-D engine, on which HotTrax® was developed, which brings the Enterprise Series™ technology to the backbone of the game. Not only does that enhance the game graphics, but it also powers our revolutionary FLEXdraw™ random number generator that allows us to create the draws required to make the game work" explained Aza Pitchenik, Senior Product Manager at GTECH.

Club Poker has been quickly embraced by the Kansas and the Rhode Island lotteries, which will each launch the game at the end of September. The game will be launched in Kansas as Kansas Hold 'em and in Rhode Island under the brand name Rhody Poker. In both juris-dictions, expectations are high for the newest monitor game rollout.

"There is no question that poker is a game people feel comfortable with and understand easily," said Ed Van Petten, Director of the Kansas Lottery. *"We are extremely excited to be launching Kansas Hold 'em at the end of the month and expect it will be a real draw for our players. It offers a playability and entertainment value that has tested very well for us."*

"We think it is a real coup to be able to offer such a dynamic monitor game that is based on such a popular premise," echoed Gerald Aubin, Executive Director of the Rhode Island Lottery. *"To be able to launch the first 'true' poker game in the online category is a significant achievement and one that we feel will appeal to a broad cross section of new players in our state."*

It is entertainment value on which lotteries are banking on player attraction. Unlike almost all online lottery games, where relatively simple number matches determine the outcome for the player, the Club Poker concept offers playability and entertainment at the same time. It is a perfect social space game because it encourages active play on the part of several people at the same time.

"This game strikes the delicate balance needed between complexity and simplicity. The game has to be easy to understand, but it also needs to have something to keep players interested, and this achieves that balance nicely," said Aubin.

Monitor games like Club Poker are not the totality of the GTECH poker offering in the online category. Supporting the company's strategy of deploying content over a wide array of game channels, the company has also developed poker-based games for the instant-online channel (Poker™, Beat the Shark™, Beat the Shark Plus™ and Instant Poker™) and in the company's innovative Pick 'n Play™ game platform.

However the game is deployed on the varied game channels, lotteries are betting on players flocking to a game they know and understand and will enjoy playing in a number of settings.

"Poker on this platform is as interactive as any game of chance can possibly be," observed Napolitano. *"Players are in the game until the very last draw of the cards, which lends itself perfectly to the social spaces in which Club Poker will be played."* ◆