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LAS VEGAS SUN

GAMES:

Seeking a place at the gaming table

How two teams of inventors are defying the odds and getting their new games approved for the casino floor



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Getting a new game approved for a casino floor isn't an easy task — and it's even harder if you're a mom-and-pop inventor and not a corporation specializing in developing supplies for the games you produce. But two teams of Las Vegas inventors are defying the odds and stand poised to see their dreams become reality. Here are their stories.

Two Cards High team suffers many setbacks, stays focused

It was just after noon on the last day of February 2008 when George and Stephanie Boutsifakos' baby landed on the Flamingo casino floor.

Stephanie, a real estate saleswoman, had fallen into an old bad habit — chain smoking — as the final minutes ticked by.

Her husband couldn't stop pacing. He walked around the slot machines. Then next to the blackjack pit. Then back to the slot machines. Like his wife, he wasn't holding up well under the pressure.

When the clock hit high noon, their baby — a new casino table game they named Two Cards High — made its debut. In a casino filled with slots, blackjack and craps tables, video poker and roulette wheels, would anyone play a card game that nobody had

heard of?

“Once we begin standing, it only takes a few minutes for players to sit down and play,” a dealer told George on his third or fourth orbit around the pit.

Finally, she came.

And when Jennifer Evans of Philadelphia sat down to play a hand of Two Cards High, the Boutsifakoses thought a five-year quest had come to an end. Evans won even money on a \$5 wager on the first hand of the game ever played in a Nevada casino.

But for the Boutsifakoses, the triumph at the Flamingo was going to be short-lived and was only a tiny glimmer of hope in an Odyssey that would take their game halfway around the world.

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Stephanie Boutsifakos remembers when, in 2003, her husband showed her his newfangled card game, Two Cards High.

She was cooking dinner and George commandeered her dining room table to draw a layout on a piece of cardboard. He was a blackjack dealer at the Golden Nugget, so he knew how to talk to people and explain the nuances of a table game.

“This is how you play it,” George said with a thick Greek accent. He dealt her five cards against his five, explaining the strategy and flow of the game.

Stephanie has been George’s guinea pig before. There was a board game (George says a prominent manufacturer stole his idea). There was the concept of a “memory foam” mattress (somebody in the bedding industry got to it first). And he even suggested putting spring coils in shoes before similar footwear reached the market recently.

But this was going to be different. He was determined to get Two Cards High into a casino.

The idea for the game sprung from a dealers break room at the Golden Nugget.

George was talking to some friends about new games when he mentioned that, well, he was cooking up his own idea. Another dealer, Sung Chang — somebody he really didn’t know that well — approached him, mentioning that he, too, had a new game.

“I said, ‘Good luck on yours,’ ” George said.

They talked about collaborating, but each was suspicious of the other, wondering whether he was going to try to steal an idea.

“It finally came down to, ‘If you show me yours, I’ll show you mine,’ ” he said.

It turned out the two ideas had several similarities. At the core of George’s plan, a player qualifies to win if three cards out of the five he is dealt total 10, 20 or 30. Sung’s game used 11, 21 and 31.

They opted for George’s version, agreeing that players would have an easier time with the math.

With Chang on board, the cardboard cutouts and mock table layouts began piling up in Stephanie’s dining room. She stayed supportive, but eventually had to order George to remove his things so that she could serve Thanksgiving dinner.

Stephanie, who prefers to spend her casino time at slot machines and in bingo parlors, thought her husband’s game had potential.

“When I saw it, I thought, ‘George is right, players would like this.’ Players can get burned out just playing blackjack,” she said. “I don’t know if I would play it, but it’s a good game.”

As George and Chang progressed with their ideas, it became clear they needed money to get to the next level.

After researching the requirements to create a new casino game — mathematical proof of a casino’s potential hold percentage; patents and trademarks on the game and its name; an expert to guide them through the regulatory process; and a professional felt layout to demonstrate the game — the partners determined that they would need at least \$60,000 to get the game off the ground, with no promise that it would pay off.

George and Stephanie would raid their savings. Chang would need a loan for his financial contribution.

In 2004 the amateur inventors formed a company: S.G.S. Gaming LLC (for Stephanie, George and Sung) and set out to sell the game to a casino.

The partners hired a patent attorney, a mathematician, a gaming attorney and a gaming equipment supplier. Then, they started making appointments with casino floor managers because, to get approval of a game through the state Gaming Control Board and

the Nevada Gaming Commission, new games are subjected to a 90-day trial run under real-life casino conditions.

The financial results from the casino tryout are measured against a control game to verify that the hold percentages are true to expectations.

Mark Clayton, a former member of the state Gaming Control Board who oversaw the state's gaming laboratory in his tenure, said regulators don't pass judgment on the popularity of a game, preferring to let the casinos — and the market — make those conclusions.

"By the time it gets to the casino floor for the trial run, most of the work is done," Clayton said.

But as their chance for the casino tryout approached, life's wild cards got in their way.

Southern Nevada's rip-roaring real estate market began fading, cutting into Stephanie's income.

Landry's Gaming, a division of Landry's Restaurants Inc., acquired the Golden Nugget and George was laid off. He found part-time work as a dealer at Terrible's.

Then, a motorist T-boned and totaled Stephanie's new Cadillac. The crash aggravated an old leg injury, forcing Stephanie to use a cane to walk.

Then, as the partners' patent application for Two Cards High was nearing completion, their patent attorney died — and nobody told them.

"We got a letter from the patent office telling us there was something wrong with one of our applications," George recalled. "So I called our attorney. The person who answered the phone said he had died three months ago."

A new attorney had to be hired to shepherd the application, costing an additional \$10,000.

"We kept asking ourselves, 'What's going to happen next?'" Stephanie said.

Indeed, one casino after another rejected the couple's request to stage a trial run. Some thought the game was too complicated. Some thought it would never catch on to the level of other games that recently had been introduced. Others simply weren't interested.

The next company on their list was casino giant Harrah's Entertainment. George was promised a 20-minute interview to explain the game to Harrah's gaming executives. It turned into an engaging, 2 1/2-hour meeting and Harrah's agreed to host the 90-day trial at the Flamingo.

"We couldn't believe it," Stephanie said. "The Control Board told us we were the first small company to have our game field-tested on the Strip. We finally started to think that we had made it."

But things went south again.

The field trial at the Flamingo was cut short because the game wasn't generating the revenue managers thought it would. George blamed it on the game's location in the casino, next to the sports book and away from a cluster of more popular table games.

The couple had to restart their 90-day trial run somewhere else.

The Golden Nugget offered its casino — but again, the trial was halted before the 90 days were completed. George suspected casino higher-ups quashed the game because they didn't want a former employee hanging around the casino, but Nugget officials said the game simply wasn't hitting revenue projections.

And then another casino turned them down for a field trial.

Just when it looked as if the game wasn't going anywhere, George and Stephanie's luck was about to change again.

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The floor at the Global Gaming Expo — the casino industry's biggest trade show — was a busy place in 2005, filled with casino managers from around the world, walking the aisles and kicking the tires on all things new in the gambling industry.

Two Cards High was one of hundreds of table games shown at the event. George and Stephanie remembered a Korean casino company expressed great interest in the game. But they never heard from it.

Fast forward to 2008, when Two Cards High was collapsing like a house of cards.

“One day, out of the blue, the Korean company called,” Stephanie said. “They said they were about to open a new casino and they wanted our game.”

Chang, who has relatives in Korea, became the point man for the game in Seoul and on July 7, Two Cards High made its debut at the [Paradise Walker-Hill Casino](#). Regulators in Korea approved the game for play for a three-month trial a day before the new property opened. It was followed by a one-year contract, paying S.G.S. about \$1,000 a month.

Casino managers were hoping they’d see \$500,000 in wagers a year — and reached that level in just three months. It easily outperformed Let It Ride, Caribbean Stud and Casino War.

Chang stayed on the scene in Korea and calls regularly to update his partners on the game’s progress while Stephanie and George apprise him of developments at home.

Back in Las Vegas, Rick Carrig, the director of casino operations at Boulder Station, heard from other Station Casino executives about a hot new table game being played in Korea.

“Station Casinos is pretty proactive in looking for and evaluating new products,” Carrig said.

And he was surprised to learn that the hot new game in Korea was developed in his own back yard.

George and Stephanie were invited to demonstrate the game in January. Carrig liked it, and offered to host the 90-day trial.

George made a few changes in the game from its last run in Las Vegas after the Korean experience. The biggest change was adding a poker side bet on the five cards dealt in the game. The other big change was to modify one of the payouts, to increase the house hold and probably make it more marketable to casinos.

The poker-based bonus bet was what got Las Vegas resident Jesse Delgado’s attention when he played Two Cards High on April 14, the day it opened at Boulder Station. He went to his favorite poker-based table game and discovered the new game right next to it.

“It’s pretty fun,” Delgado said, walking away from the table with a nice stack of chips after getting down to his last \$5 at one point. “It only took me a few minutes to get the hang of it.”

George and Stephanie have been snake-bitten by field tests that never reached completion, but are optimistic that the trial will go well at Boulder Station.

If so, their path to success faces only two final stops before gaming regulators.

She rapped her knuckles on a wood table.

“With everything that’s happened, we think we’re finally, finally in the clear.”

Long road for a simple idea: Craps with cards, not dice

Michael Christian is standing to the side as four members of the Nevada Gaming Commission huddle around his felt-topped table. It has most of the signature markings of a craps table. But there are no tub walls to contain flying dice. In fact, there are no dice.

Christian and his business partner, Jack Chappell, have spent years developing a new casino card game: craps, using playing cards instead of dice. And today, if they can just get Nevada’s gaming regulators to sign off on their adaptation of one of the most popular casino games, who’s to say how wealthy they can become?

Show us how it’s played, the state’s top gaming regulators tell Christian.

He shuffles up. It’s showtime.

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It’s fall 2004 and Christian and Chappell are in a convoy of hunters driving to the Colorado Rockies for a week of elk hunting. But, cruising across the desert of Arizona’s Indian country, they’re talking about how to play craps with a deck of cards.

Christian got the idea in 2000 when he was trying to buy a casino in Lake Elsinore, Calif. He was trying to figure a way to play craps in California, which doesn’t allow dice in its casinos. He had designed the basic table layout and concluded that drawing from a deck of cards using numbers 1 through 6 could easily replace the throwing of dice.

Christian and Chappell had met at a charity fundraiser and had become good buddies. By 2003, Christian had taken Chappell into his confidence.

And headed now for Colorado's elk, he and Chappell are talking about pass lines and hard 10s.

At first, they talked about how they could develop an electronic version of craps, but the conversation evolved into simplifying the game and making it more attractive.

The brainstorming would continue at the cabin. When the hunters went days without spotting an elk, time was filled with talk about their new game, called, simply, Play Craps.

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Neither man had ever attempted to invent a casino table game, so there was a learning curve — including a task seemingly as simple as building the table.

Christian, a California custom-home builder, liked turning ideas into steel. He had developed a horseshoe-shaped trailer hitch to ease the process of a driver connecting a vehicle to a trailer. But a steel-based table proved too heavy to move around. He and Chappell ended up paying a Las Vegas casino equipment designer they found at an industry trade show \$4,000 to come up with a table.

With the game's basic rules established and the table designed, the talk turned to refinements and how to sell the game to players and casino operators.

As a poker and craps player, Christian thought the gaming industry would welcome a craps game that plays faster than the traditional dice game and takes up less space. Casino profits are a product of speed and volume.

The wagers and payouts in Christian's and Chappell's game would be the same as conventional craps. The only difference is that instead of players rolling dice, a dealer pulls two cards out of a deck of 324, representing the values of a dice roll.

Play Craps is pitched as "a new look at an old favorite."

In fact, it isn't. In some California card rooms and tribal casinos where dice games are illegal, casinos have used decks of traditional playing cards and stripped out the 7s, 8s, 9s, 10s and face cards and developed a craps knock-off.

But Christian thought he could do better, starting by improving the cards. He filed for a patent for his "Die Cards," which are the same size as standard playing cards but feature enlarged depictions of the faces on a die cube versus numbers. Each "roll" is easier to see.

Only dealers handle the cards, which is the other big difference from the traditional game. The cards are slipped out of a shuffle box and laid in front of the dealer.

Getting rid of dice might have seemed a gamble because that's the first image of a craps table — blowing on them for luck, shouting to a group of strangers that mama needs a new pair of shoes and then artfully tossing them onto the table. But the player throwing the dice can also become the scapegoat, depending on the outcome.

"We actually think having the dealer pull the cards is a plus," Chappell said. "If a player craps out and everybody at the table loses their money, the shooter gets the blame. But if the dealer turns the card, it's that darn casino that made you lose."

Chappell's contribution to the game would be his public relations and marketing skills. Chappell, 62, spent 17 years as the director of media relations at the University of California, Riverside, before moving to Las Vegas in 2002 and working as the director of community relations at KNPR, the National Public Radio station, until his retirement in March 2007.

Chappell, who only occasionally visits casinos, spent weekends in late 2004 and early 2005 making the rounds of the city's craps tables, paying particular attention to player behavior.

"All I'd do is watch, but the more I watched, the more I understood the players and how our game would be marketable."

His reconnaissance validated some of their earlier decisions.

One of the benefits of the card game: players don't have to stand. That means less jostling at the table, which women appreciate. And the players would be more social, sitting at a table rather than standing around the larger tub.

The table, which accommodates nine players, is slightly larger than a traditional blackjack layout and about half the size of a craps tub. The compact table benefits casinos not only because it takes up less space than a conventional craps tub but because it saves wages.

Traditional craps usually is overseen by four employees — a boxman who watches the chips, a stickman who stands across from the boxman and takes bets at the center of the table and gathers the dice with a hooked stick, and two base dealers who stand on each side of the boxman and collect wagers and pay winners.

The cards version, on the other hand, can be managed by two dealers, one who draws the cards and takes bets and an assistant who also takes bets and oversees the table. On slow days, one dealer could handle the game.

As the development of the game progressed, Christian and Chappell agonized over making the table just right.

In the early days, they tried a standard blackjack table. Too small. They tried a table with a cutout area for a single dealer. Too cramped. They moved the graphics printed on the table closer to the players, then farther away. The refinement continued throughout the trial.

Knowing that it's not uncommon for some people to filch chips from their neighbor's stack, they fashioned drink holders along the rim of the table to make it harder for people to steal from the players next to them.

Chappell, meanwhile, was working on a video to demonstrate the game to gaming regulators and casino bosses. He hired a videographer and talked his fiancée and some friends into being models for the shoot.

By fall 2008, the partners were ready to take the game to [Gaming Laboratories International](#), a company that analyzes the math in new games worldwide. Regulators would need the private lab to verify the math that sets the odds for winning before it could be field-tested.

GLI greenlighted the game in three weeks, and once the partners had that endorsement, they received permission from the Gaming Control Board to proceed with the field test.

Now it was time to put Play Craps to the public test. That meant persuading a gaming executive to let Play Craps be field-tested in his casino.

Chappell had a connection in Mick Roemer. The two had served together on the board of Nevada Public Radio. Roemer had been an executive at two gaming manufacturing companies — Bally Technologies and International Game Technology — and now operates [Roemer Gaming](#), an industry consultancy with worldwide contacts.

Roemer helped negotiate a test run of Play Craps at the Eureka in Mesquite and the Rampart in Las Vegas' Summerlin community.

One table was set up in a prime location at each casino's pit.

"When we showed the game to some dealers, it only took them about 13 seconds to catch on and they were ready to play," Christian said.

For the first three months of 2009, the partners monitored the game. Chappell made a weekly road trip to Mesquite to observe play and more frequent visits to Summerlin to watch it at the Rampart.

It looked like a trouble-free trial.

Then, one day, the partners got word from both casinos that the game was making more money than had been projected at the gaming laboratory.

The reason, apparently: The game didn't intimidate novice players — the kind of inexperienced gamblers who, unlike skilled players, are more apt to make wagers on bets with longer odds.

"And that," Christian said, "might even make casinos even more inclined to try our game."

Christian said that given all the costs — application fees, paying the gaming lab for math expertise, buying equipment and supplies, manufacturing the specialized table, the consultant work, the marketing, the video and paying for trademark and patent attorneys — he expected to invest \$100,000 and that the process would take a couple of years.

In fact, the development has cost \$450,000.

The partners will have to go through a similar licensing process in other states if they want their game licensed elsewhere. But getting approval in Nevada would be a huge step.

Whether the investment will pay off depends on how many casinos buy the game and how many tables they place. Depending on the size of the casino, leases should pay from \$300 to \$1,500 a month per table.

But they couldn't negotiate any of that until they were licensed by Nevada regulators.

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Gaming commissioners meeting in Carson City on April 16 watch Christian demonstrate his game and are struck by its simplicity.

"So, it plays just like craps," Chairman Peter Bernhard says as Christian deals the cards. The commissioners watch from their seats on the dais.

Representatives of the Eureka and the Rampart, standing alongside Christian, endorse the game. Commissioners have few questions, remarking how clever the partners are for coming up with something so simple.

Bernhard congratulates the partners and wishes Play Craps the best of luck. The whole process takes five minutes.

Christian is grateful.

"Everybody was so professional, so helpful," he tells the commission. "Getting licensed in Nevada ... well, it's like getting the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval."

Christian and Chappell now face the final verdict. They've got to sell the game to casinos.

It didn't take long. The Viejas Casino near San Diego bought it, and the game premiered May 1.

"I've had people say to me, 'Gee, you must be on Cloud 9 after getting your game approved,'" Chappell said. "And I usually say, 'Yeah, and the view is great. But I can also see a lot of work from up here.'"

Christian's and Chappell's little company is at a crossroads. The partners want to get at least 100 tables in the market as quickly as they can. They'll order construction as soon as they get firm commitments from casinos and they'll negotiate the cost when the orders come in. The partners are counting on the cost being far less than the \$4,000 initial table order.

"But once we get to about 150, we'll have some decisions to make," Chappell said. "We'll have to decide about hiring people and determining where this will go next."

Nine years after the launch of a dream, those are good decisions to face.

