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## GLOBAL GAMING EXPO 2006: Take my game, please

### Entrepreneurs try to cut through dazzle and din at Global Gaming Expo

By BENJAMIN SPILLMAN

REVIEW-JOURNAL




Joanne Jenio cleans inside her Global Gaming Expo booth last week at the Las Vegas Convention Center. She hopes to do a different kind of cleaning up, profit-making, if the game she and Donald Hohman invented, Whoop Ass Poker, gets adopted for use on casino floors. Photos by [Clint Karlisen](#).

Joanne Jenio first played cards 20 years ago and quickly realized she loved the action. Jenio graduated from friendly, kitchen-table bridge games to betting and even took second place in a major online poker tournament.

But now Jenio is making the biggest bet of her life from the dealer's side of the green-felt table.

She and her partner, Donald Hohman, are among entrepreneurs betting their ideas for games will make it onto casino floors -- and make them rich in the process.

"The older you get, the more willing you are to step out on a limb," said Jenio, 57, of Upland, Calif. "This is the last chance you get to do something exciting."



Ernie Moody was an example to entrepreneurs at the Global Gaming Expo. Moody invented Triple Play video poker, which with backing from International Game Technology, has become successful in casinos.

She and Hohman invented a game called Whoop Ass Poker. It's a new spin on the popular game Texas hold 'em that uses more cards and allows players to try to buy their way out of a bad hand.

"Everyone is going to stay in longer so there are going to be bigger pots and bigger rakes for the casino," Jenio said. "Everyone is going to love it."

The hopefuls spent the week on the fringes of the floor of the Las Vegas Convention Center during the Global Gaming Expo, also called G2E.

Each year more people join the fray trying to market their innovations amid the cacophony of the gambling industry's biggest trade show.

"It's brutal. The market is being inundated with games," said Roy Ritner, an Arizona man marketing a game called Pai Gow Express. "For most people, coming here will be an enormous disappointment and an expense."

Only a tiny fraction of new game ideas make it to casino floors. Successful inventors need to persist through years of false starts and rejection and have some good luck.

"The best games in the world get turned down," Ritner said. "I hate to tell you the percentages. It is shocking."

But if a big company buys a game it can mean millions of dollars and a lifetime of royalties for the inventor.

Ritner said a game with about 200 tables in casinos and still growing could be worth \$3 million to \$5 million.

That's what drives longtime gamblers, casino workers and others to spend years dedicating their lives and savings to become the next Ernie Moody.

Moody is the former stock broker and Colorado casino owner who invented Triple Play video poker. Triple Play made its debut at the 1997 Global Gaming Expo, and with backing from gaming giant IGT, the game and its spinoffs are among the most popular casino games in the country.

"I could tell from the reactions at the show it was going to be a big hit," said Moody, who now has a company in Las Vegas called Action Gaming. "There were crowds around the game. Everyone was telling us how great it was."

Before IGT used its marketing muscle to display Triple Play at the 1997 G2E, Moody rented glorified card tables to show his table game ideas at earlier expos.

"I spent a lot of time in Colorado just trying to invent casino games," Moody said.

Even getting to the show is an enormous investment for small operators. It can take years to develop and test a game. And it's not cheap.

"We thought we were getting into something we could do for maybe \$250,000, maybe \$500,000. It is more than a million bucks now," said Jenio, who spent \$5,000 renting a space about the size of a jail cell. "We have invested our life savings in this."

Besides building, testing and marketing the game, inventors need to patent their idea and pay someone to verify the odds.

Rob Phillips, a Las Vegas-based attorney who specializes in gaming, said it can cost anywhere from \$9,000 to \$15,000 to navigate the patent process.

And Moody's success, in a way, has made it harder because it attracted more inventors to gambling than ever before.

"You have a lot of individual, Sunday-afternoon inventors filing cases," said Phillips. "It is becoming more and more difficult to find new, unique and nonobvious game concepts."

Even outside the big trade shows, large gaming companies are the subject of constant bombardment from inventors.

"I'd say we get calls daily from people who want to show something to IGT," said Ed Rogich, vice president of marketing for International Game Technology, which supplies 65 percent of all casino games in North America.

"There is only so much you can do with 52 cards and basic card games that have been around for ages," Rogich said.

And without a recognized company to help an inventor, "it is almost impossible for them to develop it and get it into casinos," he said.

The industry trade shows are a chance not only for companies to scope out innovations they are also an opportunity to watch for copycats who are infringing on closely guarded patents.

The big companies and the individuals zealously protect their ideas.

"We look at everything everybody is doing," Rogich said. "I think everybody is out there checking out everything that is on the floor."

Jenio and Hohman's goal at the show was to get noticed by someone, anyone, willing to take a chance on Whoop Ass Poker by putting it on the floor of a casino or poker room.

A spot on a casino floor is the only way to find out whether a new game can attract real-world gamblers and turn a large enough profit to justify displacing another table.

"That is why we have to find one casino who can give us statistics," Jenio said.

But it's not easy for budding gambling tycoons to stand out at the trade show.

The indoor show floor covers a space roughly equivalent to three Las Vegas city blocks and draws nearly 30,000 attendees from every corner of the gambling business.

It is a carnival of blinking lights, blaring music, smiling showgirls, back-slapping businessmen, and self-promotion.

Booths for the industry's major players demonstrate the latest high-tech slot machine gimmicks, use models in skimpy clothes to draw attention to gleaming gambling tables and are stocked with alcohol and promotional swag to ply potential clients.

Individual entrepreneurs are typically relegated to the back of the room.

They rent smaller spaces and stock them with little more than business cards, modest brochures and their own enthusiasm for demonstrating new games.

"We are not here to compete with the big companies. We are here to be put along side them," said Paul Boghossian, 32, of Los Angeles.

Boghossian and Brock Burnett of Red Door Gaming in Encino, Calif., were showing off a game called Card Craps.

The two men say they've replicated the odds of craps using playing cards and minor rule changes.

The innovations are important because they allow operators in states like California that forbid dice to offer craps, one of the most recognizable live casino games.

Transferring craps to a smaller table with several seats also makes the game less intimidating to newcomers and lowers personnel costs for casinos, the men said.

This year was their third G2E. They've sold five tables so far, all the result of the show.

"The presentation is very important," Boghossian said. "We are here to show this game to people who know what works in a casino and what doesn't."

But even a game with obvious upside like Card Craps and several tables already in play in casinos faces long odds.

Moody said game development is dominated by a few large players and casino managers are unlikely to take a chance on something unknown.

Player tastes are also changing, Moody said. Today's gamblers want games they can learn quickly and play on intuition.

"If you had to market craps today, I don't think you could make it work," he said. "I don't think people these days are that patient."

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