

Casino Surveillance: Looking in the Wrong Direction

Casino surveillance is, I contend, all too often...Looking in the wrong direction.

I began working in the casino surveillance field as far back as nineteen ninety-five in the days of VHS cassettes and analog cameras and four SIF resolution. It was, in some ways, a very different age. There was far less data available to analyze for a start. There were far fewer electronic systems that could help out with doing investigations or in actually finding the information that you needed to successfully conclude them.

So, in some ways, it was very different.

In other ways, for far too many surveillance operations, it was exactly the same as it is now. The march of technology has completely avoided elements of the industry, and, as a result, these elements of the industry still act as though it was the days of VHS and analog signal, and no additional data being available.

In organisations that have a surveillance and/or security department that act in this way they would, if asked simply reply that: "...the surveillance department's job is to watch gaming tables and next to nothing else."

And this, I would contend, is surveillance looking in the wrong direction.

Janus

The Romans had the myth of Janus, the two-faced man. One face looking forward, one face looking back. And my concern is that far too many people within the surveillance industry, and especially the casino surveillance industry, are adopting the looking back element of the Janus duality and not the looking forward piece.

They're looking back to some past, to the way that things used to be done. To policy and procedure and, all too often, even to rules and regulations that were fit for purpose twenty or thirty years ago; and have never been examined through the lens of 'are they still viable now'?

Of course there could be a lot of reasons behind that, although I think the main reason is probably comfort. This is how people grew up within the industry. For the Surveillance Directors, or VP's or even Shift Managers this is how surveillance operators did it when they were operators, and now they're running surveillance departments, and they're still doing things the same way. They see their job through the narrow lens of 'watch the table games, occasionally monitor whatever security is getting up to'.

But if you actually look at the job description for pretty much any surveillance operation, certainly for the job description of surveillance directors, surveillance senior managers, vice presidents, whatever, that is almost certainly not their job description. Their job description is generally of a rather wider range of duties, tasks and responsibilities than that.

The problem that we have is how they carry out their job, how they run their departments, the ethos that they instill in their own staff; and generally speaking that is nowhere near as comprehensive as it might be, nor as forward looking as, arguably, it should be, Back to our Janus-duality.

The Increasing Divide

And this is a real shame for the casino surveillance industry because, certainly in North America, the casino operation itself is increasingly moving away towards table games.

Every conference you attend, every time you talk about table gaming, the underlying message is that table games are in decline. That this is only even potentially true in North America is never really looked at. We are a parochial industry at heart. But if we assume that that's correct for North America and there's no likely comeback and table games will retain at a relatively low level moving forward, then why the monomaniacal focus?.

And I think that the received 'wisdom' that table games are doomed is not necessarily correct. I think there can be a revival in table games. I personally have always found table games far more interesting than slot machines could ever be. And that, of course, is one of the reasons why surveillance departments focus so much time and effort on watching them. They are more involving, more things do happen there.

But if we look at the new opening of Resorts World's property in New York, the table game business has grown to a spectacular size very, very quickly because there was a pent-up demand for locals in the area for table games, and I think the wider table games operation within the North American casino business could potentially profit from that. Table games are more interesting and more exciting than slot machines or even EGMs. And this should be better understood by everyone involved.

So whether we do, or do not, believe that table gaming in North America can make a comeback is beside the point with regards to this argument, which is if the surveillance department is intrinsically watching the wrong thing, the lack of a comeback or the state of the table games industry is really beside the point. If that is the sole and narrow focus of the surveillance department, then like Janus only focusing upon one of his faces, because Janus, of course, was a god that looked in both directions simultaneously; only looking at one element of a Casino operations of it is to miss the bigger picture within the operation itself, especially if the operation happens to be an integrated resort.

If we look at table games and we think the table games are ten percent, fifteen percent, twenty percent of the business, then there is another eighty percent of the business that's

not being regarded. Is this business slot machine play? Well, some of it most definitely is. And there are dangers in slots operations. There are the dangers of persistent state machines and the advantage players who have increasingly moved away from table games, but because they know they're being watched. To slot machines where they know they're not and where their activities while personally profitable for them does not affect the overall house advantage in any meaningful way. Although it does, of course, rob money effectively from the standard bread and butter players, the legitimate players, to line the pockets of the advantage players.

But if slot machines are now sixty percent of your business, then, logically, there should be far more effort from or on the part of surveillance devoted to looking at these slot machines. And, of course, the traditional response to that is: "...oh, well, slot machines are safe because they're electronic."

Well, that just great. So, we should discount the Russian teams that were filming certain versions of slot machines and gaining advantages from them. We should ignore the advantage players that are increasingly attracted to slot machines because of the lack of scrutiny or the individuals who are continually scamming your hosts by removing their players card before they cash out any TITO's and then claiming endlessly that they've lost all their money in the hope that free play is going to be thrown in their direction?

All of that should be ignored.

What about the food and beverage? Is no one stealing from the food court? Is nobody stealing from the bars and restaurants within the property? Is that something that's not considered stealing or theft or fraud by the surveillance department? Because the surveillance department have a 'table game focus'. Because if that is the case, then, again, I would say that the underlying ethos of that department was wrong.

The Balanced Department

I'm arguing that a casino surveillance department should be a balance department, should almost be a universalist department. It should look at pretty much anything, and it should be able to investigate pretty much anything as well.

What new technology does your surveillance department deploy? Does it look at the results from food and beverage? Do you have tie ins with the items that are being ranked through the point of sale to confirm that people aren't on a 'profit share' that the management of the operation knows nothing about? Because in such a case anyone who pays cash effectively have it diverted into this individual staff member's pocket while they operate the register.

Does the surveillance department routinely examine the performance of the slots estate, especially of electronic table games. These devices usually fall under the remit of the slots department, but the slots department are not table games people; and sometimes the actual parameters of the machines themselves can be miss-set so that errors and predictive possibilities are factored in because no one's doing anything to weed them out.

Is this being examined by the surveillance department on a regular basis?

We all know surveillance departments watch fills and credits to be sure that none of them are going missing. We all know that they should be watching the count to make sure that none of the cash goes missing. But does this actually occur?

Are surveillance involved in any kind of investigation with regards to who is getting markers or credit and what exactly are they doing with that? Are they monitoring the amounts of free play that are handed out by the slots department or the hosts, and who is getting this free play and what are they doing with it? Are they looking at the membership scheme and the various loyalty points that are being earned and the various tiers of membership that exist?

And are they making sure that there are no scams involved with this? No frauds involving gaming staff creating erroneous/fraudulent ratings out of thin air and then benefiting people through the benefits that complementaries can accrue.

All of this should be at least as important as watching the high-stakes Baccarat again, which everyone else in the entire casino is watching as well. And that's not to say that you shouldn't be watching high-stakes Baccarat. You should. Of course you should be analyzing the table play. You should be analyzing the players within the casino to see how well they are doing compared to the expectation of how well they should be doing. With the added capability that people who are performing well beyond expectation should be watched on a regular basis to see how they are managing this.

All of these things should be done on a regular basis. So, are they being done on a regular basis?

Let's examine a specific: What about facial recognition technology? Do you have it? Are you using it? Are you looking at it? And if you are, what exactly are you looking at? And what are you looking for? Is it only people who are connected with table games and individuals who've got in or fight and you have to kick out for various reasons? Or are you doing more in-depth investigations across a whole range of concerns within the wider casino or Integrated Resort environment?

Face recognition systems can be full of advantage players who were card counters on Blackjack or alleged card counters on Blackjack, or were involved in some kind of a Baccarat or cut card scam, but were they really in on it? Did they really get involved? And did anyone really see that? Have you documented concerns over a long enough period to determine whether they are valid or not, or are you accepting other people's word for it?

Even over and above this the modern facial recognition and integrated data-systems can do so much more than that: you can investigate money laundering and terrorist financing and keep abreast of title thirty-one obligations to the operation. You can work hand in glove with compliance departments to make sure you're as well protected as an operation as you can possibly be.

This is all possible with facial recognition.

You can combat the scourge of human trafficking and look at groups of individuals, especially where you have a hotel associated with your gaming floor or with your casino. What's going on in those hotel rooms that you know nothing about because of this focus upon table games?

"I was watching the big Baccarat game."

Sure, you were. But what were you missing? Were you missing evidence that human trafficking was going on and was going on within your casino, and there was something that you could have done about that?

There is far more going on in the casino operation, any casino operation, even the smallest, even one that isn't an integrated resort that will be missed if surveillance is focusing attentively upon table games only.

If you're watching only table games, my contention is you're watching the wrong thing.