

The History of Slots: From Mechanical Device to Crypto Video Game

Slot machines have been a favorite among gamblers all over the world since their invention, and this is unlikely to change any time soon. Despite significant technological advancement and leaps in the entertainment industry, slot machines are to this day one of the games most chosen by gamblers, still considered great in their simplicity. This is not to say that slot machines have remained entirely unchanged in their 100-something year-old-history, but their core elements are retained with features added and expanded upon constantly.

Naming

Have you ever wondered why they are called slot machines? For most people it's just a name, it doesn't really mean anything, right? But, names have to come from somewhere and this is a recent enough invention that we are fortunate enough to know the origin of *its* name. Originally, these machines were called "nickel-in-the-slot machines" - because a nickel is what you would pay to operate them! Obviously, slots have come a long way since then, as nowadays not only do you *not* need a nickel to play, you can even use an array of different cryptocurrencies to pull that lever.

Speaking of levers, slot machines are also often called *one-armed bandits* - a very apt name, the *one-armed* part referring to the side lever you need to pull to operate them. The bandit part, you ask? Well, because they take money away! While the bandit part may not have changed completely, steps were certainly taken to ensure that slots aren't rigged or unfair, and providers do try to be transparent about the potential earnings or losses you may have. Just make sure the game you're playing comes from a reputable provider and is *Provably fair*.

Other parts of the world also call them poker machines (*pokies* for short) or fruit machines, but the most widely known moniker - and the one that stuck even in the era of crypto - is *slots*.

The first gambling machines

Before we arrived at the slot machine as we know it today, there were a few design iterations with different features. One of the first gambling machines was based on poker, invented in 1891 in the city of New York. It featured five drums that held 50 card faces, quickly gaining so much popularity that many bars in the city soon had at least one of these machines.

How they worked

In order to play, patrons of these establishments would insert a nickel and pull a lever, causing the drums and the cards that they held to spin. The best poker hand would win. As these were quite simple machines, they did not have an automatic payout system - instead, the establishment would decide what each hand got for a prize, from cigars to free beers and everything in between.

The earliest versions of slot machines

The popularity was undeniable, so it wasn't long at all before machines that paid off in coins came into existence. Around 1888, we had the earliest versions of slot machines pop up all the way across the country, in California. These worked by having the inserted coins fall onto an internal balance scale, which could tip and release more coins. Later models had a circular display with a spinning pointer that would stop on a specific number, color, or image to determine the outcome.

The first modern slot machines

The inventor of slot machines as we know them today was Bavarian-born American inventor, Charles August Fey. He created the first coin-operated gambling machine in 1894, and went through different iterations that all had different levels of success. The most popular one was the Liberty Bell slot machine, built in 1899, which featured bells, horseshoes and playing card suits on the reels. The maximum payout was achieved by getting 3 bells to line up. The Liberty Bell proved to be so popular that Fey's competitors rushed to copy the design.

Soon, however, slot machines came under scrutiny by various groups such as the clergy and the law, and in 1909 they were banned altogether. Finding a loophole in the law, Fey and his competitors now created machines that did not accept or give out coins - instead, the transactions took place over the counter of the establishment, with payouts consisting of things like drinks or cigars.

Origin of the fruit symbols

We've mentioned above that slots are still known as fruit machines in some parts of the world. That name comes from the fact that for many years, the most frequently used symbol on slot machines were different fruits - but there was a reason for this, too.

The use of fruit symbols on slot machines became widespread in 1909 thanks to the Industry Novelty Company. To bypass legal restrictions on slot machines, the company designed their machines to resemble chewing gum dispensers, swapping out traditional card suits with symbols of lemons, cherries, oranges and plums. These represented different flavors of gum, and the company even created a few machines that actually dispensed chewing gum. This approach was picked up the following year by the Mills Novelty Company, which added an image of a chewing gum pack to its reels—later stylized into the iconic "bar" symbol. In 1916, the Mills Novelty Company introduced the concept of a "jackpot," where specific combinations of symbols on the reels would release all the coins in the machine.

Slot machines remained popular throughout the Great Depression of the 30s, but the fact that organized crime was widely involved with slot machines led to legal sanctions against them, limiting their use and transportation significantly. By 1951 slots were practically completely banned everywhere in the US except Nevada - but the law often turned a blind eye.

The first slot video game

In 1976, Fortune Coin Co. developed the first video slot machine, taking the first steps that led to modern online crypto slot machines. This machine featured a modified 19-inch (48 cm) Sony Trinitron color television for its display, along with logic boards to handle all slot-machine operations. The prototype was housed in a standard slot-machine cabinet, and the initial production models were tested at the Las Vegas Hilton Hotel.

After some tweaks to prevent cheating, the video slot machine received approval from the Nevada State Gaming Commission and subsequently gained popularity in casinos on the Las Vegas Strip and downtown. In 1978, IGT (International Gaming Technology) purchased Fortune Coin Co. and its video slot-machine technology.

The first bonus round

The first American video slot machine with a "second screen" bonus round was Reel 'Em In, developed by WMS Industries in 1996. However, this type of machine had been seen earlier in Australia with the game Three Bags Full, released in 1994.

How the electronic format improved slots

As alluded to previously, the electronic format of slot machines allowed for more functionalities, starting with the bonus round. Here, the screen changes to display a different game, offering players a chance for additional payouts, often much greater than those of the base game.

Computerization also allowed for more complex payout systems that are based on multipliers, or different mechanics like Megaways and tumbling symbols. For an overview of modern functions and features, see our page about crypto slots online.

The luck of the draw

Through their fascinating history, slots have come to us relatively unchanged, and in many cases we still see their basic elements even in the most elaborate of video slot games - a testament that their basic principles are solid and appealing to players.

Nowadays, we can gamble on slot games from the comfort of our own home - all we need is a device, an internet connection - and some crypto to place bets with. ;)