
MAN VS. MACHINE

A VIDEO POKER MACHINE DEALT JUSTIN CURZI A STRANGE HAND. NOW HE'S CALLING THE OREGON LOTTERY'S BLUFF.

BY BETH SLOVIC bslovic@week.com

Justin Curzi pecked the draw button on the Jacks or Better video poker machine. The glow from five game screens lit the maroon walls of the windowless room in the back of Northwest Portland's Quimby's bar. He'd been burning through his \$10 for just five minutes, like so many video poker players do: mindlessly drumming the button, barely stopping to think about the hands the computer dealt him.

Curzi, 35, had moved to Oregon in 2012 from San Francisco after selling a software company he'd helped found a decade earlier. He was fascinated with the games—the ubiquitous, flashing terminals found in bars, delis and even pancake houses—and he played occasionally when out drinking with friends.

On this day—Jan. 10, 2014, a Friday—Curzi paused playing video poker while a pal went to get a beer. He used the break to study his hand—a 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7 of different suits. He was close to getting a straight, which would pay \$5 on a \$1 bet.

The game Curzi was playing, draw poker, allowed him to discard cards and get new ones from the dealer. He knew his best chance was to discard

the 2 and hope the machine dealt him a 3 or an 8 to complete a straight.

But the machine suggested he do something Curzi thought strange: It recommended he discard the 7. He would get his straight only if he drew a 3. That would cut Curzi's chances of winning by half—and he thought it was terrible advice.

“Hey, is this right?” Curzi asked his friend when he returned.

Curzi took out his iPhone and snapped photos of the screen and the machine's serial number.

It was the first step to uncovering what he says is a \$134 million scam by the Oregon Lottery.

CONT. on page 14