

# Fortune Telling

Every major developer, in any industry, has had its breakthrough product that gave the company the platform it needed to become one of the best. 25 years since its launch, IGT's Wheel of Fortune remains one of the gaming industry's most successful slot brands of all time.

IGT's Boris Hallerbach, Director of Premium Content, and Dubravka Burda, Senior Vice President, Global Studios, offer G3 a behind-the-scenes interview on how Wheel of Fortune has created and sustained a level of success that is without equal in gaming.

Combining the expertise derived from Dubravka's 24 years in the gaming industry with Boris' 18 years as Product Manager for Wheel of Fortune, Dubravka begins by explaining how important Wheel of Fortune has been to the success and establishment of IGT.



**Dubravka Burda**  
Senior VP Global Studios,  
IGT

**Dubravka:** Wheel of Fortune is our most important slot game brand without a doubt. Whilst IGT is very conscious about ensuring we have a good product mix by working with several teams internally and externally, Wheel of Fortune has sustained a high level of success for many years. It is a continual challenge for us to hold onto certain Wheel of Fortune elements whilst also developing the brand.

**Boris:** Wheel of Fortune really is the tentpole for IGT in our premium business. It makes up a significant portion of our premium revenue and its sustained agency for these past 25 years in a pretty major way. Dubravka and I work very closely together on the Wheel of Fortune portfolio in particular and we have studios that specialise in its development.

When Gtech acquired IGT back in 2015, one of the key things was to see how the companies could come together. We brought the best brand in gaming and Gtech brought very innovative technology, particularly in 3D. We produced a Wheel of Fortune 3D game that was very successful. A lot of that was built on adhering to the recipes that we have learned over the years that made Wheel of



**Boris Hallerbach**  
Director of Premium Content,  
IGT

Fortune successful, such as the wheel spins, iconic sounds and bonus frequencies. Since the successful coming together of these two companies, we've been able to extend our innovation and success with Wheel of Fortune even further.

**How did Wheel of Fortune capture the imagination of players? Is there any factor or ingredient you can single out as being pivotal?**

**Boris:** It is a confluence of factors. Wheel of Fortune was really the first brand in slot gaming. Back in the early mid-90s our CEO at the time, Charles Matthewson, and a representative from Sony got together and talked about the possibilities of bringing Wheel of Fortune to gaming and so the idea was born.

When Wheel of Fortune hit slot floors, we took a very reductionist approach. Rather than try and replicate the whole show on a slot machine, we took the elements that we thought resonated best with slot players such as the wheel bonus, the iconic sounds, the brand, the colours of the wheel, and the Wheel of Fortune chant. We carefully put these elements into the games with recognisable slot mechanics IGT has produced over the years. For example, our first games had base themes, so it was Wheel of Fortune on top of Red, White and Blue, Double Diamond and Triple Diamond.

Slot players could recognise these base themes whilst non-slot players and vacationers could walk by and exclaim 'Oh my God - Wheel of Fortune!' and be excited about those games. The confluence of timing and being able to tune the brand to known slot mechanics was a big part of its success. It also hasn't hurt that to this day we still have Wheel of Fortune on daily television in the United States and Canada. Wheel of Fortune being on the air offers a daily reminder. For many people it was the first slot machine they played, creating a very loyal following over the years.

Do you keep a selection of older, traditional slot machines and Wheel of Fortune iterations in casinos, or do you transfer as many as possible to the latest versions? Is there a nostalgic fanbase for certain types of machine?

**Dubravka:** It has to be a mix and it ultimately depends on where we want to place the machines. If we create a new technology such as 3D or multi-line games, these will obviously be very different to more traditional stepper hardware. We have different approaches depending on where we are placing our Wheel of Fortune games.

However, it ultimately depends on the customer, not us.

**Boris:** Over the last 10 to 15 years, we've really brought the brand along with popular slot playing mechanics. When

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video became popular, we produced Wheel of Fortune video games. We went from low line to high line games, introduced 3D, with our Mystery Link product we integrated hold and spin mechanics. We are constantly seeking to evolve the player experience in line with player tastes.

With regards to keeping old machines on the floor, we do still have some of our earliest \$2000 games on casino floors and this is driven by players. You'll find some of these in high limit rooms where some players just play that particular machine. Early Wheel of Fortune games are ones certain players want to see when they visit





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a property, so operators keep that version of the game. Generally speaking, operators continually seek to modernise their floor and we modernise the Wheel of Fortune portfolio along with that.

**Is Wheel of Fortune still as much of a 'tentpole game' as when it hit the huge heights 20 years ago? Has it lost some of its lustre or sparkle with the launch of brand-new, shinier IGT products?**

**Boris:** We definitely want to make sure that IGT has a diversified portfolio, so we have offerings that hit many different market segments. Wheel of Fortune is still a central part of our product strategy and we build specific product lines and development pipelines around the brand. Wheel of Fortune is very important for us but, that said, I think the market today is very different from what it was back in the 90s when Wheel of Fortune was launched.

From being the first branded theme to what we see now with myriad branded themes out on the floor, being bigger, better, and shinier is all important. I don't think we've neglected Wheel of Fortune in that way. We continually bring Wheel of Fortune up to our latest hardware. We have already mentioned 3D, but our 4D is one of our best-performing themes out there. We've introduced our Megatower slot machine, a giant 11-foot-tall jumbo machine, and that's been hugely successful.

Over the years, we've created implementations like our Super Spin, a giant nine-station machine with nine stations surrounding a giant central wheel. We've not only evolved the gameplay but also the hardware, so I would still say it's very relevant even though the premium space has become crowded with more competitive offerings and competitors.

**Dubravka:** Wheel of Fortune is the only brand that is also driving hardware. Normally, this is not the case. The brand is so strong that we invest and develop hardware specifically for Wheel of Fortune.

**How is Wheel of Fortune perceived internally? How much responsibility do you feel with every iteration?**

**Boris:** I feel a huge personal responsibility for the brand. I would say there's a

balancing act in how we bring the brand forward. First of all, we're very true to Wheel of Fortune in that we have iterated along with their style guides over the years. We're constantly using their most recent style guide materials to stay current with the show. From a branding and licensing standpoint, we're very true to the brand.

On the gameplay side, there are a couple of things that we try to keep true to maintain the trust we've developed with players over the years. For example,

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players of the original games came to expect the wheel spin within a certain frequency, and we have kept that to a large extent throughout our iterations despite bringing all sorts of different gaming mechanics into the game. When players play a Wheel of Fortune game, their primary desire is to spin the wheel, but we also faithfully preserve the sounds, the voice-overs and the Vanna White videos, further deepening player affinity.

We do take risks in some cases. We try different art packages and game mechanics – most work, some don't, but we learn from those mistakes. There is a product development skeleton we work with, but we let our game producers have some freedom with updating the game mechanics to make a compelling slot game.

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we want to collaborate with them which is different from other branded titles out there. As Boris says, the emotional investment of players who watched the show for many years is one of the key reasons it has been successful for so long.

**What has been the value back to the TV show of having Wheel of Fortune on the floor of so many casinos? How does the game play back into the popularity of the brand and concept of the show?**

**Boris:** We have a great relationship with Sony and have worked closely with them over the years. In the last five to 10 years, they've been very open with us in how they've been changing the show and we've been very open with them about where we want to take the brand. It's very collaborative.

Sony is the defender of the Wheel of Fortune brand and they are very strict from a branding standpoint, but they give us a pretty long leash when it comes to slot mechanics and gameplay.

Whilst Sony protects the brand, they know that we are the slot experts, so they give us a lot of leeway. We have monthly meetings with Sony's leadership and the licencing team where our game concepts are reviewed by the producers whose input has been great.

The slot brand is integrated into the TV show's identity. Sony has hosted Wheel of Fortune weeks in Las Vegas where IGT has brought slot machines onto the set and they co-located with a customer of ours, Venetian, to do the show on the strip. We also have the 25th anniversary coming up that will see plenty of co-promotion.

**Are there other IP's you would put into the 'tentpole' category?**

**Dubravka:** IGT's own Cleopatra, Wolf Run and Scarab have been great successes for us, and Sex in the City has been another great external brand. We always want to use and utilise a combination of internal and external brands and are ever mindful of how we can build up these brands.

**Boris:** At IGT we always look towards the licensed brands that we have. Of course, Wheel of Fortune is certainly number one, but Sex in the City and the Price is Right have been great brands for us on the premium side. That being said, our

internal brands have a huge amount of value as well. We have a dedicated brand support team that cares for internal brands such as Cleopatra, Wolf Run and Scarab making sure we're continually iterating on those brands and maintaining the core elements in each. They are a big part of our portfolio.

**What is the legacy of Wheel of Fortune?**

**Dubravka:** The legacy can be seen in all the machines and hardware that has been developed over the decades and in the

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numerous teams that have worked on Wheel of Fortune who have shared in the success. Wheel of Fortune is huge, and the fact machines are in so many casinos are testament to its quality.

**Boris:** When I'm in social circumstances, particularly outside of Nevada, people ask me what I do and when I say that I work for a slot manufacturer, I get a blank stare. When I then say that I work on Wheel of Fortune slots its then 'OH, I know that!'. It's an instant ice breaker that speaks to the legacy of Wheel of Fortune within IGT.

**What is the future for Wheel of Fortune?**

**Boris:** We're not taking our foot off the gas. Wheel of Fortune continues to be a central part of our product strategy and we are continuing to develop new hardware and game concepts at an increased rate to ensure that Wheel of Fortune is solidified now and into the future.

