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**Bennett Liebman, Esq.
Coordinator/Staff Attorney
Racing and Gaming Law Program**

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21st Century Dreidel

The gambling game of dreidel has become synonymous with the Jewish festival of Hanukah. A dreidel is a four-sided square top, which has four Hebrew letters on each side. The letters are Nun, Gimmel, Hay and Shin, which stand for the Hebrew phrase "nes gadol hayah sham", a great miracle happened there, which in turn symbolizes the marvel that the oil at the initial Hanukah celebration burned for eight nights and days.

The game operates much as a prehistoric dice game. It is played typically for a penny, but also for candy, matchsticks or other tokens. Every player first antes up. Each spin has four equally likely outcomes. The players take the turns spinning the dreidel. If the letter Nun (N) comes up, there's no payoff, and play passes to the next player. If Gimmel (G) comes up, the player collects the entire pot, and everyone contributes a penny to form a new pot. If Hay (H) comes up, the player collects half the pot. If Shin (S) comes up, the player adds a penny to the pot. The game continues until one player owns the entire pot or until some agreed upon stopping point.

This game has been played for centuries, and the fact is that while some small children might enjoy it, the game is at best slow and tedious. It is hardly the crack cocaine of gambling. It is closer to the Sominex of gambling. Also at least according to one mathematical study it is an unfair game. The first player has a better chance of winning than the second player, and on and on.¹

The thought here is that the game of dreidel needs to be refitted for the 21st century. The payoffs need to be increased. The pace of the game needs to be sped up, and there ought to be a way to involve all the players while one player is spinning the dreidel.

It might be best if the game of dreidel could be combined with the best elements of the gambling game of craps. Two dreidels would be utilized., and the game would be played against a bank – rather than against the other players. All players could bet on all spins of the dreidel, and there would be the opportunity to win (or lose) real money. In short, it might actually be an interesting game.

Many skeptics might claim that craps has seen better days, and that it reached its peak during the era of Nathan Detroit and the Rat Pack. Even if that is an accurate assessment of the current state of craps, it is far better than the game of dreidel which probably peaked in popularity during the age of Maimonedes.²

Here's how the basics of the 21st century dreidel game might be played. I have no training in statistics so the odds calculations are rudimentary. As a casino game, 21st Century Dreidel could be designed to insure a house edge on all wagers, but the edge would not be the same for all wagers. It could also be played as a friendly game with

¹ Feinerman, Robert. 1976. An ancient unfair game. American Mathematical Monthly 83(October):623-625.

² The Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonedes lived from 1135-1204.

almost no edge to the house. I have tried to use traditional craps terminology to describe possible wagers.³

Basic Play:

Pass Bet – (Even money) On the first spin, the player and the pass bettors win on any doubles. Any other result becomes the point. Let's say it's NS. If the payer spins an NS before spinning any double, the pass bettors win. If the player spins any double before spinning NS, the pass bettors lose. spinning NS, the pass bettors lose. This is truly an even money bet. If this was a casino which needed a house edge, you might make the pass bettors lose on a double S on the first spin.

Don't Pass Bet (Even Money) This is the reverse of the pass bet. On the first spin, the "don't pass" bettors lose on all doubles. Once the point is established, the "don't pass" bettors win if a double comes up before the point is spun. The "don't pass" bettors lose if the point is spun before a double. Again, this is a 50-50 bet. A casino might want to charge the "don't pass" player double for a double S.

Similarly "come" bets and "don't come" bets (Even Money) would work in the same fashion as "pass" and "don't pass" bets after the point has been established. Again the odds are exactly even money for these bets.

Single Spin Wagers

Any Double (3-1) The odds of spinning a double are 4 of 16. So in order to put the players at the same level as the bank, the payoff should be 3-1. At a casino, the payment might be 2-1 or 5-2.

2 N's, S's, G's H's (15-1) The odds of spinning 2 N's, or any specific double 1 of 16 or 15-1. Again, at a casino, it might be appropriate to maintain a house edge and pay of 14-1 or 13-1.

Any N, S, G, H (2-1) The odds of spinning at least one N or other specific letter is 5 of 16. This translates into real odds of 2.2-1. The appropriate odds level for a payout both in a casino and at a friendly game should probably be 2-1.

Any N, S,G, or H but no doubles. (3-1) The odds of spinning at least one N (but not 2 N's is 4 of 16 or 3-1. Again, a casino might only pay out at 5-2 or 2-1.

Point Established Bets – These are wagers that can be placed after the point has been established. It is traditional in craps that the "pass" and can take "pass" line the odds by placing additional wagers on their original bets after the point has been established. (Same is the case for "don't pass" bettors who can lay the odds after the point has been established. These bets are set at the correct odds. Most casinos will allow the player to

³ See <http://www.1-online-craps-guide.com/craps-terms.html> for a guide to terms used in craps.

double or triple the size of his or her original bet. In 21st century dreidel, the additional “pass” bets would pay off at 2-1. The additional “don’t pass” bets would pay off at 1-2.

Opposite – (Even money) If the point is G-S, then an opposite bet would be that H-N would be spun before the G-S is spun. There are 2 in 16 chances that a G-S would be spun, and similarly 2 in 16 chances of an H-N. The odds are exactly even, and this would be appropriate in a friendly game, if not at a casino.

There are clearly other wagers that might be considered in the 21st century game of dreidel. But the point, is that 21st Century Dreidel⁴ is not just your forefather’s crappy dreidel game. It has the potential to get people over the age of 10 interested in playing dreidel. It offers plenty of action and the opportunity to win significant money. It could be a popular wager in the state of Israel which is considering legalizing casinos,⁵ and it might prove to be a useful wager for charitable organizations conducting casino nights during the season of Hanukah. Who knows? Maybe we’ll have to worry about dreidel specialists shaving dreidels designed to produce Gimmels.

⁴ Other names for the game are possible. Maybe it should be called Crappy Dreidel, Dueling Dreidels , or maybe Mideastern Stud Dreidel?

⁵ “BDI: 3 casinos will create 1,200 new jobs,” [Globes \[online\] - Israel's Business Arena](#) December 10, 2003