

Casino croupiers pass on test of poker machines

First, ATMs elbowed aside bank tellers. Then, voice mail eliminated phone operators. Now, poker machines are muscling in on croupiers at Quebec's casinos.

One of the world's most storied professions is becoming automated but it's creating a standoff between the dealers and the house.

Quebec's 1,450 unionized croupiers said yesterday they will boycott a test next week of 25 automated poker tables at the Montreal Casino. The dry run will involve no-money games reserved for Loto-Québec staff.

The automated tables, which deal virtual cards to players, are to open to the public at all three provincial gaming houses on Friday.

With the machines, Loto-Québec wants to usher Texas Hold ,Em – a highly popular form of poker – into its casinos. The crown corporation also will start to offer the game at tables with croupiers.

The croupiers, who are about to enter contract talks, say the tables are illegal and charmless.

The PokerPro tables, made by PokerTek, a gaming company based in the United States, do not meet Quebec's legal requirement that slot machines be pure games of chance, said Jean-Pierre Proulx, a spokesperson for the croupiers union, affiliated with the Quebec Federation of Labour.

„Poker is a game of strategy,“ said Proulx, a former supervising croupier.

The union is awaiting a ruling from the Régie des alcools, des

courses et des jeux, the board that regulates gambling in the province, on the legality of the machines.

Réjean Thériault, a spokesperson for the board, said a ruling cannot be rendered until a written report arrives from the Sûreté du Québec's crime laboratory certifying the machines are up to standard.

Loto-Québec spokesperson Jean-Pierre Roy said the crown corporation has received „verbal notice“ the report is in its final stages and will get to the board by Friday.

Quebec casinos now offer other types of poker – including Three Card, Let it Ride and Caribbean Stud – with croupiers.

The advent of automated poker tables isn't threatening the bowtie-clad croupiers' long-term future just yet, another veteran card dealer said.

The machines can't supply ambience, the main reason people choose casinos over Internet poker sites, said Sylvain Calouette. „They don't make people relax,“ said Calouette, who has worked at the Montreal Casino for 13 years.

„They don't help you have fun. If all you want is to play on a machine, just stay home and play online. There you can drink and smoke if you want, too.“ Boris Baran, a senior lecturer in decision sciences and management information systems at Concordia University's John Molson School of Business, said the croupier's role in Texas Hold ,Em is limited.

„All the decisions are made by the players,“ said Baran, a former national bridge champion.

„All the croupier does is deal cards. A machine would make no difference.“ Jim Ross, a member of a West Island poker club that meets in people's homes for games, said he doubts the fairness of an automated poker game. „Anytime you're on a machine you risk getting screwed,“ he said.

Ross added the machines might attract gambling addicts in search of a bigger adrenalin rush because, as ProTek's website boasts, the tables provide „faster, mistake-free dealing (and) more game offerings. No tipping.“