

Gambling may be available on airlines

By Daisy Carrington, CNN

Two French aviation design studios are betting on gambling in the air.

Jean-Pierre Alfano of AirJet Designs and Frédérique Houssard, the founder of Designescence, have teamed up to create the Casino Jet Lounge, a luxe bar-cum-casino they hope will one day become standard on long-haul commercial flights. The Casino Jet Lounge features trendy seating, a drinks area and a blackjack table.

“We’re trying to bring back the glamor of the ’50s and ’60s a little bit; the kind you see in the James Bond movies,” says Houssard.

The concept is relatively new (launched last October), so as of now, Houssard and Alfano are still in talks with various airlines.

The idea of in-flight gambling may seem like a new one, principally because no airline is currently doing it. But in reality, the concept has been around for decades.

Singapore Airlines took gambling up in the air in 1981, when they installed lightweight slot machines in the aisles on a flight that operated between Singapore and San Francisco. It was an experiment that lasted a mere two months. The company admits the machines posed “an operational challenge”, and had them removed.

In the 1990s, Swissair installed gambling software that allowed passengers to bet up to \$350 on a variety of casino classics, including poker, keno and blackjack. It seemed other

carriers were going to follow suit, that is, until a Swissair plane crashed in 1998. Air crash investigators implicated a failure of the jet's in-flight entertainment system as a reason for the disaster.

However, the idea of in-flight gambling re-emerged a few years ago. Virgin Atlantic Airways tycoon Richard Branson announced in 2005 that a handful of recently purchased A380 planes would include double beds and in-flight casinos.

"You'll have two ways to get lucky on a Virgin flight," he joked with The New York Times.

The company seems to have backtracked since then.

"Casinos were just an idea, along with many other ideas we talked about a few years ago," a Virgin spokesman told CNN. "Truthfully, we did not really get any further with it."

They declined to comment as to why they didn't ultimately implement casinos on their A380s.

Ryanair announced in 2004 that it would introduce gambling through an in-flight entertainment system, though this too has yet to come to fruition. Ryanair's head of communications, Stephen McNamara, said the company still hopes to do so in the future.

"We don't have the technology in place at the moment, but hopefully we will in the next two or three years," he says. "Really, the reason we don't currently is based on the expense of the Wi-Fi technology that would be required for it. We're waiting for the price to come down."

Aside from the initial investment, there are several other barriers to introducing casinos on airplanes. For starters, as more carriers are unrolling Wi-Fi on their flights, passengers could feasibly just gamble online from their mobile devices. One wonders if this wouldn't defeat the purpose of airlines

investing in their own gaming systems.

McNamara says that Ryanair plans to combat the issue by ultimately offering “closed loop” Wi-Fi, so that passengers will have to go through the airline’s own system to gamble.

Houssard and Alfano also don’t see online gambling as competition to their own concept.

“When you’re gambling on your screen, or on your phone, you’re still cramped with other people. If you get out of your seat and enter another space with your friends and colleagues, it gives you a completely different experience,” notes Alfano.

“When you’re on a 14-hour flight, even when you’re in business class, all you can really do is eat, drink, watch movies and sleep. The Casino Jet Lounge isn’t just a bar or entertainment idea. We see it as a social space.”

It’s difficult to imagine that airlines would be willing to give over potential passenger space (and the fares that come with it) to a social arena, but Alfano says if designed properly, there shouldn’t be a conflict.

“Most big aircrafts have crew rest areas and lavatories in the cargo area down below. The space could be easily rearranged to include a social space, without representing a loss of revenue,” he says.

The biggest obstacle to in-flight gambling, however, is a legal one. Since 1994, gambling has been prohibited in U.S. airspace. Still, Houssard believes that this might change in the future.

“A few years ago, it was forbidden to play games for money on the internet. It was not open then, but now you can play online. A lot of things are changing.”