

Brains behind the games

There is no secret formula to a successful game; if there were someone would bottle it. There are, however, a number of 'brains' behind the games you see in an arcade, as we find out in this month's feature



THE 'next big thing' in the coin-op amusement industry is just around the corner... or is it? Is there even such a thing?

According to Eugene Jarvis of US-based game developer PlayMechanix, almost all 'next big things' are evolutions of the 'last big thing'. Sometimes they are refinements of ideas that were total failures before, but technology and human culture has evolved to make the timing right – think of Apple's first tablet platform, the Newton developed in the 80s. What should appear almost 30 years later – the iPad.

"If you consciously try to make the next big thing, it's likely that it won't be," Jarvis told *InterGame*. "Sadly, most completely new original ideas are rubbish or don't work with current technology or human factors. A game is like a boat...you have to get everything right or one little hole will sink you. Game play and human interface are the most important, but if the graphics are all little grey boxes no one will play your Angry Birds."

For Jarvis, when it comes to innovation, while it is necessary it is expensive. "Ninety-eight per cent of innovation is failure," he said. "Learning through your own failure is necessary, but should be minimised. Learn from the failures and successes of others – cross pollinate proven successful ideas to create new ones – work with human nature, not against it."

Sega Amusements' Justin Burke mirrors Jarvis' view on innovation, telling *InterGame* that for every one idea that's fantastic there are usually eight or nine ideas that never see the light of day. "The biggest challenge is the initial idea," he said. "You can change a business plan or cabinet design to get around other problems but if the initial idea isn't strong enough then it doesn't matter as you'll produce it and it just won't work. This is where our office in Japan leads in my opinion, they'll persevere with ideas, people probably thought Donkey Kong and WCCF were mad ideas at the time, but Japan persevered and had successes."

Similar to that of the Apple story, Sega has (and still does), in the past gone back to ideas that might not have worked first time round – Misfits being one.

"We produced it but it didn't work and wasn't strong enough to go into full production so it was canned," said Burke. "The US office has tweaked the original idea and has since succeeded with a small production run, enough to make the project worthwhile at least."

The biggest challenge when trying to come up with the 'next big thing', according to Harry Lev Amusements' Colin Mallery, is not to over complicate things. "Some of the best games around, feature easy to understand game play and have been built at a price that the market will accept," he said. "We try to give the player value for money, keep the game play interesting, bring redemption and prizes into the pusher offer and so on. You should always be innovative when producing new product but too much too soon can make a successful product over complicated and too expensive."

So where does the inspiration come from for the new game titles we see on the trade show floors from year-to-year? It can sometimes be found in an existing game but is occasionally

found in the most unlikely of places, as Nick Hardy of UK games developer Games Warehouse told us: "The creation of a game involves several different disciplines and contributors from varied backgrounds. A game development may begin with a software engineer who thinks of a method of executing a game idea – how the game will be played – or it may begin with someone seeing something on television or in a magazine and thinking the concept or theme could be developed into a game. One of our best game ideas began when a lady in our accounts department brought in a child's board game and suggested it could possibly work well as a touchscreen SWP game."

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Trade shows themselves, along with conducting market research, are also good places to start for initial ideas and inspiration, as InJoy Motion's Cynthia Lai explains: "We send our R&D development team to lots of trade shows and amusement locations within the leading markets to learn about new games and player trends. We also research other leisure and entertainment sectors to find out what consumers like and it sometimes inspires new features for our simulators."

For Lai, it is also important to keep a close eye on consumer trends. She told *InterGame* that due to the wide spread of information available and rapid advances in technology, consumer trends are constantly changing.

"There is more and more for the consumer to choose from," she said. "Therefore, we feel consumer trends are extremely important for the development of our new games. For example, we see the children and family segments growing rapidly so we have created Dido Kart, which is made up of adorable features and characters and has an appealing presence to this audience."

"The coin-op amusement industry also has to face stiff competition from the rapid development and spread of online games and console gaming and so faces massive pressure to be innovative. Manufacturers need to spend more time creating new features to draw people back into the FEC."

But is this where the coin-op amusement industry is failing? Do the game developers need to think outside of the box more? Do the operators need to think outside of the box more? Does everyone need to start working together to draw those customers back into locations?

"You can try as hard as you like to produce the 'next big thing' but the players have the final word," said Adrenaline Amusement's Marc-Antonie Pinard. "If they fill the cash box, then they are the next big thing. The industry needs to align itself more with the next

generation's interests and their consuming trends. Our generation was the Intellivision/ATARI2600 generation, today's kids are the iPad/iPhone generation. These young customers expect a lot from their day-to-day video game experience and the market is already supplying them with something unbelievably great that cannot be matched by the most recent arcade pieces.

"Also, manufacturers need to change and move away from the "bigger than life" spirit as its only differentiating factor, as most households are now used to this. When it comes to video games and entertainment, watching films and playing games on a projection system is fairly common. Kinect is a great technology, but is already at its apogee as it's getting cheaper and cheaper to own the device for everyday use."

"Focusing on Kinect control and integration capability rather than its Xbox software/game catalogue could open fields of opportunities, continued Pinard. "Sega did a brilliant mix and match between an existing technology and an uprising software/game with Monkey Ball... applying the same logic with Kinect could deliver impressive results...it's all about innovation and considering the next generation – they represent the future."

The technology used behind the scenes is also an essential part of a game's success. While game designers can be innovative in their thinking, it all comes down to what technology will allow you to produce – you can have a great concept but if the graphics are dull and lifeless and if the sounds are crackly and quiet and the game play isn't quite there... you're heading for a fall, relating back to Jarvis' point that a game is like a boat. "You have to get everything right or one little hole will sink you."

According to Heber's Richard Horne, the job of the technology provider is to make development as easy as possible and provide robust technology for long-term supply, ensuring investment by the game designers and manufacturers can be reused time and time again. "At Heber, we have always understood the need for powerful and stable hardware platforms and we look forward to seeing what amazing things our customers create, even with the most advanced technology it still takes a special software team to make game development really shine" he said.

For Horne, the rapid growth of online, social and community gaming has been driven by both players and extensive investment in new technologies by manufacturers and operators. "Technology has provided players with more choice and easier access to both new and old games," he said. "PC-based gaming technology speeds up the rate of change and provides players with a fantastic range, safe in the knowledge that something new is always around the corner."

"The essential components of a great game are fun and excitement," continued Horne. "Far too many games are over complicated or use flashy graphics to hide a poor game engine. Rapid growth of internet gaming has not helped this problem but at least now the player has greater choice."

Looking ahead, for Zeljko Loncaric of Congatech, which also provides the technology behind the games, in general computer performance will support a growing computing

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capacity meaning the feature set available will expand to match the growing requirements for better interactivity with the player. "Market requirements have a strong influence on new hardware features," he told *InterGame*. "For example, the rapidly growing encoding performance supports greater player interactivity and there is a growing trend towards enhanced usability, interactivity, 3D, virtuality and still action in gaming."

While some manufacturers get their inspiration from trade shows, talking to customers and in-house brainstorming, there are also plenty of new ideas that come out of collaborations with operators and FEC owners. For example, Barron Games' Gregory Bacorn tells us that new games such as QuadAir have been developed through a collaboration with a large FEC owner in the US. "We both wanted to provide a game that was engaging to the whole family at the same time," he said. "We were watching an air hockey table being played and noticed that there was always a wait to play. With a one on one table, usually one wins and the other walks away. There was a strong need for a whole family to play one game against each other without someone having to wait to play."

"Inspiration comes from studying and witnessing people play and meeting a need that is not met," he continued. "Most importantly, at Barron Games, our inspiration comes from creating a wow factor and creating something that we would want to play. Anna and I spend a lot of time in FECs and look for a specific need in a location that is not met."

"A lot of investment goes into a new game," continued Bacorn, "not only money but more importantly time and skill. Also finding the right market to test for optimum results is a challenge. We know that QuadAir is not for everyone due to its size, but positioning the game as a centerpiece with the option of customisation, income levels are limitless."

There is an overflow of games that are so similar customers lose track of game X and game Y. We have taken a very traditional game and changed how it is seen, played and enjoyed. Parents who played air hockey as a child will remember their first time – we are bringing the 70s memories into the 21st century."

Another argument is that, while technology is important to the evolution of gaming and amusement, it is the player interaction element which is really key to success. For Christian Bimminger, head of international marketing and sales for Funworld (Quanmax), its focus is on online and mobile gaming. "We think that interactive and social community features should be incorporated into modern games. Chat rooms, messaging features or online services such as facebook, MySpace and so on," he said. "In addition, new kinds of media like smart phones or tablet computers should also be used in combination with/as an extension of classic game terminals. Operators and manufacturers have to think about new ways of entertaining and should develop innovative products which integrate booming trends such as the smart phone and tablet computer. With the internet terminal 'touch2web', online skill platform 'funwin' or the new 'funpad', we are trying to bridge the gap between the traditional coin-op business and new developments" he said.

"Our new strategy is that our games should provide a worldwide connected game pleasure when and wherever they are played, in the bar/pub, arcade, internet café or even at home. State of the art technology and up-to-date programming languages make this possible and are the basis of our game developments."

Moving forward, the coin-op amusement industry is going to face continued competition from not only the home console market, as technology continues to push this sector forward, but other areas of leisure too.

As Games Warehouse's Nick Hardy sees it: "When a person walks into a bar our machines are competing against the brewers of beer and the makers of peanuts. This is the magnitude of our task and those within our small and parochial corner of the wider leisure industry need to get their heads around this reality. We have to work harder today than yesterday and tomorrow we will need to work even harder."

"To attract and captivate consumer interest is a massive challenge and what operators and manufacturers must accept is that it requires substantial and ongoing investment and that this investment cannot be entirely borne by developers and manufacturers, as is currently the case. We are constantly asked for 'more' by people who want to pay 'less' and this approach has no future. Our role is to create new ideas, present them in new ways and offer potential players a richer and broader experience. This is what we try to do every single day. If our customers are unprepared to match our input with investment in what is their own future also, then this train will draw to a halt. This is not some kind of threat, it is just a simple and extremely logical reality."

And while for Hardy, the future is all about investment and the industry seemingly working closer together to succeed, for Games Media's Rick Mountney (also based in the UK), while new technology is great, it depends largely on location. He told *InterGame*: "New technology that works really well for the home marketplace may not necessarily always work in public leisure locations. What is certain is that new features and new technology are a key focus for everyone – it's how we renew our products, stay ahead of the competition and keep engaged with our customers. At Games Media we embrace technology and will continue to drive forward with every applicable development – the guiding principle is that the new technology improves the player experience."

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