PLAYING FOR REAL

Simon Murphy, Head of Gambling EMEA, FremantleMedia Enterprises speaks to G3 about the licensing issues facing the industry both online and land-based

Simon Murphy is the Head of Gambling EMEA at FremantleMedia Enterprises (FME). Simon joined the FME team, who represent such well-known brands as The X Factor, Britain's Got Talent, Family Fortunes, Take Me Out and many more, with more than eight years experience in the online gambling, mobile and land-based industries. During this time Simon has held key roles with WagerWorks, the remote gaming arm of IGT. Prior to that he was the Commercial Director of Million 2-1, a mobile gaming specialist acquired by IGT in June 2008.

WHAT ROLE DOES FME PLAY IN THE CONVERGENCE PROCESS BETWEEN LAND-BASED, ONLINE AND MOBILE GAMING AND WHAT LICENCES ARE YOU LOOKING TO EXPLOIT ACROSS THESE DIFFERENT CHANNELS?

FME plays the role of brand owner and content developer across converging channels. We are best known in the space for our online brand extensions but we have a number of mobile and land-based projects very close to completion. We very clearly see a route to market for branded content via all channels.

WHAT WILL THE NEAR-FUTURE OF ONLINE, MOBILE, LAND-BASED GAME CONVERGENCE LOOK LIKE - AND WHAT PART WILL FREMANTLEMEDIA'S BRANDS BE PART OF THAT LANDSCAPE?

In our case, we are converting a number of our existing online games into mobile, making relatively small changes in order to maximise the experience on a different device. The majority of the game-play, maths and features are carried across unless there is a very good reason for not doing that. In terms of land-based, our game developments are being done largely from the ground-up given the prevalence of different Platform, regulatory and player requirements. FME and other premium brands will continue to have an important role to play for the more mature online and land-based sectors. In terms of mobile, this will be amplified due to the relatively short supply of content in the market.

ONLINE AND LAND-BASED IS WELL ESTABLISHED, BUT MOBILE GAMING

"Brand partnerships are becoming increasingly sophisticated as brand owners and Operators look to include a broad range of Rights across play for real, social, online, land-based, mobile, marketing Platforms and live events. This trend will continue as players engage in different ways. Another clear area for development will be cross-territory arrangements as regulation evolves."
SIMON MURPHY, Head of Gambling EMEA, FremantleMedia Enterprises.

REMAINS A NEW MEDIUM - HOW DO YOU SELECT THE RIGHT PARTNERS TO KEEP YOUR BRANDS SAFE?

We are currently working with a number of experienced mobile development companies in order to build mobile games. Our selection process has been based on technical capability and general understanding of how to not only build but also deploy mobile content. In terms of keeping the brands safe, this is the most important aspect in all of our development relationships and is no different for mobile than any other channel. Working closely with the developer and Operator through rigorous stages of testing is also a factor on which we would not compromise.

GAMES TIED TO BRANDS ARE OFTEN RUSHED TO MEET TV/FILM SCHEDULES, HOW DO YOU KEEP QUALITY HIGH AT THE SAME TIME AS ENSURING GAMES MEET OPTIMUM TIME SLOTS?

This is a very difficult balance and where there is any question that game quality is being sacrificed, we have taken a longer-term view that it is better to get the game right than get the game quickly. When a product is rushed to market it rarely delivers its potential. I guess we are reasonably fortunate in that our TV shows have been successful for a long period of time now and continue to show great strength in the market.

SHOULD THE EXPERIENCE ACROSS DIFFERENT MEDIA BE THE SAME? OR ARE YOU LOOKING AT DIFFERENT GAMING EXPERIENCES ACCORDING TO THE DEVICE BEING USED?

It varies. For online and mobile we do look to keep the experience as similar as we can, allowing for certain things that just won't work on a mobile device due to screen size normally. That said, with more modern devices, this is not so much of an issue as it once was with a range of varying Java only devices. Thankfully we have all moved on from those days... With regards to land-based, as alluded to above, we still look to get the same entertainment value and branding across, but different stake sizes, prize levels and player habits dictate that the game probably needs to play in a different way.

DO DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PLAYERS SHIFT ACCORDING TO THE TYPE OF MEDIA BEING USED TO PLAY THE GAME?

This is probably more a question for the Operators that market our games and experience these types of trends on a day to day basis, but my personal view is that online and mobile players are becoming closer in terms of type. Certainly with tablet devices the experience of playing a game on 'mobile' is much closer to playing a desk-top game. As such audience profiles are closely connected for online and mobile with the value-add being that the same customers can play in different ways according to their location and mood.

WHAT'S THE VALUE OF FREEMIUM GAMES FOR A COMPANY WHOSE ROLE IS TO MAXIMISE REVENUE FROM THEIR BRANDS? WHAT FREEMIUM GAMES HAVE YOU BEEN INVOLVED IN TO DATE? HOW DIFFERENT ARE THESE TO PLAY-FOR-REAL?

In partnership with Rank Interactive and Enteraction, Britain's Got Talent Bingo Stars has recently been launched on Facebook. From a FremantleMedia Enterprises EMEA perspective, this is our first entry into this space. From a broader FremantleMedia perspective we have experience of launching The Price Is Right Slots on Facebook via Ludia, a Montreal based social gaming company that is wholly owned by FremantleMedia. With Britain's Got Talent Bingo Stars, this extension fits perfectly with the broader brand and product partnership we have with Rank Interactive and will be further developed with more products and different brands in the near future.

IS THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF FREEMIUM TO PROGRESS THE PLAYER TO PLAY-FOR-REAL, ARE THEY AN INTERMEDIARY SOLUTION OR A GOAL IN THEIR OWN RIGHT?

All of the games in development are intended to engage players via the 'freemium' model as well as then offering up the chance to go play for real. In terms of business model, it will be very interesting to see where the largest return is derived from.

HOW DO YOU APPORTION YOUR RESOURCES AT PRESENT? WHAT WEIGHTING DO YOU GIVE TO ONLINE AS OPPOSED TO LAND-BASED AND MOBILE FOR EXAMPLE? HOW DO YOU SEE THIS CHANGING - WILL IT CHANGE?

Our main focus remains on the development and distribution of online games as well as a small number of land-based titles. Whilst mobile gaming has promised much in the past five years, we believe that there has never been a better time to address growing Operator interest and player demand for mobile content. As such we are increasing emphasis onto mobile game development and deployments.

WHAT EXAMPLES OF GREAT GAMES CROSSING THE CONVERGENCE BOUNDARIES WOULD YOU HOLD UP? ARE YOU LOOKING TO FOLLOW THESE EXAMPLES OR FORGE YOUR OWN PATH? IS THE CREATION OF A DEFINING GAME ACROSS ALL CHANNELS A REALISTIC GOAL?

Having a single game that works across all channels is one way of achieving successful convergence, however, this may not always be possible due to technical restrictions or differences between devices. Applying strong brands across a range of products that work on multiple devices is also a way of extending the player experience and maintaining continuity.

IS IT BETTER TO WORK WITH ONE COMPANY THAT SPANS ALL THE DIFFERENT MEDIUMS OR TO INDIVIDUAL SPECIALISTS WORKING IN THEIR SPECIFIC AREAS?

In an ideal world one multi-channel, multi-platform developer with outstanding skills in all areas would be beneficial, but the reality is that development companies tend to specialise in certain areas. Also, even within a specific channel say online slots, we look for different things according to the way a brand extension is perceived.

ARE GAMES EXTENSIONS OF THE TV BRANDS OR ENTITIES IN THEIR OWN RIGHT - WHAT DO THEY GIVE BACK TO THE EXPERIENCE FOR THE PLAYER?

A game is both. It's an extension of the TV brand due to the fact that the game wouldn't exist without the programme, but it is also transformed in order to appeal to the gambling market so an entity in its own right.

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR EXPERIENCES OF WORKING ACROSS DIFFERENT PLATFORMS/ MEDIA TO DATE? HAVE YOU ACHIEVED THE RESULTS YOU EXPECTED/ WANTED - AND AT WHAT STAGE ARE WE IN THE CONVERGENCE PROCESS?

Brand partnerships are becoming increasingly sophisticated as brand owners and Operators look to include a broad range of Rights across play for real, social, online, land-based, mobile, marketing Platforms and live events. This trend will continue as players engage in different ways. Another clear area for development will be cross-territory arrangements as regulation evolves.