

Bingo without boundaries

Part two of our feature on bingo technology, by Andrew Branscombe of Parlay Entertainment

Online gambling activity is already starting to see a substantial increase in its revenues, even before deregulation of the UK gambling sector has arrived. In recent months both trade and consumer press have seen a number of articles exploring this fairly new market development and the subject has even made an appearance in the city pages, via reports on William Hill's performance.

Expansion of the non-land-locked gaming industry is starting to gather pace and is primarily delivered to consumers via their computers or hand-held communications tools, such as personal digital assistants, hand-held PCs or mobile phones. While programming capability has long since been able to handle the complexity of games and devices that are capable of handling such sizeable applications have been with us for a while, the key issue holding things back has remained 'connectivity'. Domestic internet users on standard telephone dial-up internet connections suffer both as a result of slow data transfer speeds and loss of connection. Hand-held devices have also faced similar problems through wireless connectivity.

Making the connection

While the connectivity issue is slowly improving, as more domestic users take up broadband access, it remains one of the main challenges in providing bingo over the internet. Unlike bingo halls where players can be seen and see one another, internet bingo players are connecting to a central game from remote locations and loss of connection can render a player

invisible. If players in a club do not have tickets for the next game they are able to alert staff who can see where the players are located in the club and ensure that they receive what they need, namely tickets, in order to play. If virtual players lose their connection they become invisible to the operator who then has no means of identifying them as wanting to play.

Despite this, the number of people who want to play games over the internet is constantly growing, due to increases in the number of people with internet access, improvements in the quality of connection and a very significant change in the way that people view their computers and mobile devices. Younger generations have grown up with mobile phones and portable games as a means of entertainment and therefore view computers not only as tools for work, but tools for leisure. This view is slowly moving up through the generations, with ever-increasing numbers of people online for leisure.

Due to the issues of potential player 'invisibility', Parlay has developed a method of operating bingo on the internet that ensures fair play and maximum uptime for the players. To achieve this, games are played in an instant browser-based game or in a download version.

Instant versions allow for quick access to the games and easy upgrades and enhancements, enabling players to use the newest version of the game immediately from the website. Download versions allow the player to install the games directly to their computer, with a link on

their desktop. These games can also be provided for installation on a CD that can be handed out in land-based clubs or mailed to customers. As computer and internet connections get better, instant games are becoming more popular. However, CDs are a very effective marketing tool.

In your hands

In addition to the more 'traditional' internet games, wireless gaming, through mobile and hand-held devices, is becoming very popular. Providing bingo on smaller devices proves more of a challenge, due to the restriction of the screen size, but it is still possible to display four game cards. However, secondary games and AWP's, like slots, videopoker and table games, are more easily viewed on such devices and are becoming more popular.

Increasing consumer acceptance of playing games on mobile devices, particularly phones, provides a very good development opportunity for new and existing online game operators. Smaller games on mobile devices can be offered to complement the main bingo product, in much the same way that machines are provided in land-based clubs. If customers are with you for one product, it can be very easy and profitable to introduce relevant offerings that are complementary.

The latest development for a lot of online games has been the ability to link to wide-area, progressive networks, in a similar way to linked MCB and linked bingo, which offer large jackpot games nightly or weekly. This has enabled online operators to develop their product offering in a similar way to land-based operators, expanding the range and variety of games available. Many sites have a link connecting to the jackpot game just before game time, allowing players to see the size of the prize. This development in online bingo follows in the footsteps of the online casino sites, many of which have been offering huge progressive jackpots for a number of years and have found them to be a great promotional tool.

As the UK becomes increasingly broadband enabled, mobile phone ownership nears saturation and consumer acceptance of mobile and online leisure gaming grows, opportunities in the online gaming market will explode. Anticipated deregulation can only serve to hasten this development.

● For more information about Parlay Entertainment Limited, visit the website at www.parlaygroup.com



As consumer acceptance of mobile and online leisure gaming grows, opportunities in the online gaming market will explode