

# Technology and bingo

Developments in both land-based and online gaming technology offer operators and players new experiences and opportunities. *Bingo Link catches up with ECM Systems and Parlay Entertainment in the first of a two-part feature*

ECM Systems, based in Hull, is a well-known name in the UK bingo industry. The company is constantly growing its business and increasingly earning a reputation overseas. Touchscreen bingo and gaming using the e-Box continues to be the major focus of activity. Having successfully launched the e-Box system at Mecca in Glasgow in autumn 2002, a revised version was launched for Gala Scunthorpe in late 2003. Both installations have proved popular with players and staff alike.

Chris Drake, the man behind the Bingo Wizard project at Gala is very pleased with the impact of the e-Box. Gala Scunthorpe is regularly selling out of positions on busier nights, with evening sessions currently attracting more than 80 per cent average occupancy. Rob Brown, the club's General Manager, is delighted with player response to the new terminals, even without promotional support.

ECM is now working on integrating its smartcard payment system with the new terminals. This will allow a number of new games and features to be offered to players, giving them significant benefits. Sales Manager Jim Moss told us, 'Development of bar ordering and payment will allow



players to pick their favourite drinks and snacks from the playing position and pay for them. Moments later, the order will be delivered to them by a steward with no need to handle cash. Operator benefits will also be incorporated. No cash boxes to empty and full player spend tracking are natural by-products of the system.'

ECM was the first to introduce TEDs, the electronic dabber, to the UK a few years ago. TEDs are portable bingo 'ticket minders', which allow players to handle up to 75 tickets for each game. The product has been revised and relaunched and now offers a radio transmission system, allowing the hand-held units to communicate directly with a central club control. This means that players can never end up on the wrong book or page during the session. The system sends out signals to the TED each time a number is released by the caller. The player simply has to press a

button to mark that number on all the tickets they have purchased. Players are now finding the new TEDs so easy to use that many are using them in addition to playing paper tickets. The increase in tickets sold benefits both the prize fund for the game and the operator overall.

TEDs are not just popular with frequent players who see them as a means of managing more tickets, but they also appeal novice players and the disabled. For these types of player TEDs offers a 'low anxiety' way to fully participate in the game and keep up with their expert friends. ECM has worked very closely with the Gaming Board for Great Britain during the trials, to ensure full compliance with the new code of practice for electronic bingo terminals.

ECM's position as a leader in gaming technology has also been strengthened by the recent appointment of Richard Blackshaw to the post of Technical Director. He joined ECM's R&D team in 1988, having run his own technology business since graduating from Birmingham University. He has been

Players enjoying a game of touchscreen bingo via the e-Box system, which was originally launched at Mecca Glasgow in autumn 2002 [NO DETAILS CAME WITH PIC]

instrumental in the development of all core bingo and gaming systems in the company's current portfolio and has an in-depth operational knowledge of the industry. The directorship sees Richard assume responsibility for all technical aspects of ECM's operation.

## Parlay Entertainment

Canada-based Parlay Entertainment specialises in the development of online gaming sites and businesses. A lot of its current business is based in the USA, which is not surprising as the US has led the development and use of the worldwide web. Having worked through the initial stages of growth and development of the online market in the US, Parlay has gained some very valuable experience in terms of taking land-based businesses online.

In the UK it is only recently that use of the web for leisure activity has really started to take off and the UK has also been heavily dependent upon US sites, due to a lack of alternatives. This is slowly starting to

change and the UK market is going through many of the same growing pains that the US went through, but at a much faster rate. UK operators can learn a great deal from their US counterparts and ensure that they do not repeat the same mistakes.

People have been playing bingo on the internet for over five years. US-targeted sites such as BingoHall.com and BingoMania.com have been around for a number of years and while the US market may have no shortage of sites, there are not a huge number of operators. At present there are about 30 to 40 internet bingo operators, although based on the appearance and branding of sites players could be forgiven for thinking otherwise. Each operator is likely to run a number of sites catering for the different segments within the market, as the technology that underpins it makes this very easy to do.

The vast majority of internet bingo players are still based in the US and their profile is roughly as follows:

- Over 80 per cent are female
- 85 per cent are under 55 years old

- 50 per cent of players also play casino games
- 75 per cent play at land-based bingo halls
- Their number one interest is bingo
- They play more than four times a week
- They also play land-based bingo.

An interesting aspect of online bingo, which Parlay Entertainment's Managing Director Andrew Branscombe believes to be a crucial factor in developing and sustaining successful businesses, is the way in which players' land-based demands are so similar. Their need for social interaction and a sense of belonging



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and fitting in are key for players in both environments, as is the need for a menu of games and activities.

Parlay has discovered first hand that online or internet bingo is highly dependent upon chat rooms, which are the software programmes that form a part of a site and allow users to communicate with each other via their keyboards while online, with the dialogue recorded in temporary pop-up dialogue boxes.

Chat-room software allows the online bingo experience to simulate the social aspects of land bingo and helps stimulate the growth of the site. In further meeting players' needs bingo games are supplemented with many additional games, including chat trivia games, partner or neighbour games, slots, videopoker, lottery and keno. A lot of the sites also allow players to set their computers to auto-dab their bingo games, leaving them free to chat and play the supplementary games.

Andrew Branscombe said, 'A lot of online players look to have the best of land-based bingo made available

to them, without having to leave their home/computer. For most this means the opportunity to play a variety of games and socialise with friends.

In exactly the same way as players of land-based bingo meet existing friends and make new ones by attending a club, chat rooms enable the same process to take place online, with the added benefit of not being restrained by geographical distance.

'In working with a broad range of operators to establish and build a number of bingo sites, we have seen on each occasion that the provision of a good chat room is vital, as it will be one of the key components of growth and sustainability of the site.

With the arrival of online bingo, players can now indulge their favourite pastime 24/7, without having to worry about inclement weather or transportation. You may not find too many friends in the chat room at 3am on a Monday morning, but you can play.

• In part two we will look at the different technologies and gaming platforms for online bingo.

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The hand-held TED electronic dabber, which was first introduced by ECM, acts like a portable 'ticket minder', allowing players to handle up to 75 tickets for each game