

Maintaining standards

InterGame explores the importance of cabinet design and after-sales maintenance

GAME content may well be the core of a product, but its appearance is often what attracts players. Today, cabinets are designed to not only house a game but provide an element of interaction and - increasingly - comfort for the player. Maintaining the performance of a cabinet is also of the utmost importance to operators. Machine down time is, after all, time spent not making money. Here, *InterGame* takes a look at the design process as well as the spares and after-sales service offered by market-leading companies.

Cabinet design

IF the recent IAAPA and EAG trade shows highlighted anything, it was the sheer breadth and variety of amusement game design. It also demonstrated the influence of consumer electronics technologies in some areas, yet the exact opposite in others, where more traditional, mechanical games remain a staple of a location's offering.

"Fashions come and go in all types of product design and game cabinets are no different," said Steven Tan of Universal Space. "Currently, designs are ranging from the massive deluxe machines that act as centrepieces in larger FECs, arcades and casinos, down to the very tiny children's vending, miniature versions of standard machines. Although technology allows us to produce smaller, more compact machines, that is not always what the operators and public want."

Sega's Justin Burke suggested that away from traditional driving and shooting games, some redemption pieces, such as Doodle Jump, which is based on the popular smartphone app, are beginning to follow the example of iPad-generation consumer electronics.

"Games like Doodle Jump are striking in their simplicity," he said. "They're working on that 'less is more' look seen in today's touchscreen technology devices. That sort of thing is a different approach for redemption games. There's still a lot of variety across the board."

Evidently inspiration can be taken from just about everywhere but the pay-to-play amusement industry has never been afraid to recycle and make use of older, more traditional concepts. Touchscreens may be increasingly finding their way into cabinet design, but many of the best performing games are based on a mechanical concept.

Helga Verstraeten of games manufacturer Elaut said there will always be a place for such machines. "Electro-mechanical games will always be attractive," she said. "However, touchscreens are fun and are part



of our modern society so they can't be ignored."

Burke, shares a similar view. "I think mechanical games will always be around and aside from the latest touchscreen-based games, mechanical games are a massive part of that redemption business."

Milk Jug Toss from ICE is a prime example of this, he said. "You can't get more simple or traditional than that. Such games have always worked and always will do."

The key here, though, is how the integration of newer technologies and concepts can benefit these games and deliver a play experience for an increasingly tech-savvy audience.

"UNIS is best known for the manufacture of family games, many of which are mechanical," said Tan. "We have been taking advantage of new technology within those designs and will continue to do so. New technology helps to advance and enhance new ideas and themes."

Yet, he said, consider the toy market. "Today technology gives the toy manufacturer massive scope and yet so many toys are based on the traditional toys that we ourselves grew up playing. Technology advances all the time and, although we make the best use of it, we do not have to lose sight of the designs that have also been successful over the last few decades."



The design of a cabinet is dependent on a host of factors. Verstraeten said that the process begins with a question – “What does the market need?”

Burke said that often the initial idea is altered and changed to meet both cost and market requirements.

“You probably start with an elaborate and fantastic design – and then work backwards once you’ve realised the cost and whether it will realistically work! You know what the game needs to do to work and how the cabinet should accommodate this and you try to make sure that the two meet.”

There is also a range of other factors to consider, he said, not least how the cabinet can be packed and shipped to customers.

“You have an idea that is ultimately influenced by variables that you cannot control.”

Steven Tan said that the development phase for a machine involves a great deal of research and long feasibility studies.

“UNIS is probably best known for its children’s games and therefore with these in particular we always consider functionality first and then add the aesthetics,” he said. “Once this part of the design is in place, then we make the cabinet as attractive to its audience as we can. Aesthetics are always most important to attract the player to the game to begin with, then the functionality of the game will ensure repeat play.”

There are huge differences between the sizes of cabinets and the industry has an excellent track record of designing the show stopping centrepieces that capture the attention of the crowds in larger FECs, as well as the smaller cabinets needed for venues where the ROI per sq.m ratio has to be that much greater.

“Is there a desire for smaller footprint games? Not really,” said Verstraeten, “big is beautiful!”

Size is clearly a consideration, however, and while there may not be a standard cabinet size across the industry, certain types of games, such as driving games, for example, follow a similar pattern.

“Size is important when you’re designing, although aside from the extremes, you’re generally aiming to be realistic. You wouldn’t necessarily make a new driving game twice the size of every other driving game,” said Burke. “Different territories can handle different sizes, so in the US, where they have big-box FECs, they can handle bigger pieces. Sometimes you have to try to please all markets at the same time.”

Increasingly, greater emphasis is being put on comfort at the machine. The ergonomics of a cabinet, seat or game can influence time spent at the machine and that is crucial for operators.

“Ergonomics are important,” said Verstraeten. “When players are more at ease playing a machine, they will tend to play more. So, if there is space, a chair can be an important tool.”

For Tan, the ergonomics of game cabinets are a key element of design. For children’s games, this means ensuring that the design enables them to operate the controls easily.

“With the games that we produce aimed at both adults and children, you are giving play value to a game by adding seating designed to encourage longer play at the machine. Our deluxe versions of Fruit Mania and After Dark both have seating, but as they already have a larger footprint than our smaller machines, adding the extra seating area is not an issue. If the game play is quick, then there really is no need for a chair but visit some of the FEC locations and you will see more chairs incorporated into the schemes for general comfort.”

Sometimes in order to realise a new game concept, the manufacturer has to explore new materials. Here, the size of a game can mean using more durable materials to ensure it fully supports the concept.

“Depending on the type of game and the use of it, we use a variety of different materials,” said Verstraeten. “Our first concern is, is the cabinet strong and solid enough for its use and where will it be used?”

The aesthetic design of a cabinet also often requires something new and innovative, explained Burke. “A few years ago we produced a cabinet called Sonic Allstars Racing that had a lit seat. It doesn’t sound too revolutionary now, but back then it was the first to light up and colour-coordinate the whole cabinet. The tricky thing wasn’t the lighting, but the plastic that we had to find that was transparent and could be molded into the correct shape. We then subsequently used the same plastic for our Bejeweled game, which also lights up.

“We do look and find new materials. The average passerby probably wouldn’t realise how much work goes into such materials.”

Cabinet design is clearly a complicated process that requires the striking of a balance between many seemingly conflicting requirements. The next step, of course, is ensuring that once placed in a consumer-facing location, the machines maintain their aesthetic appeal and mechanical integrity.

Spares and after-sales

THE purchase of a pay-to-play amusement machine is an investment and in today’s economic climate, operators have fewer funds available to them to buy new equipment as regularly as they have done in the past. Effective and on-going maintenance is therefore crucial and there are a host of companies dedicated to providing such a service, providing both spare components and their expertise.

Paul Smith, sales director at E-Service, a company that operates a spares and repair service, said that operators are aware of the need to stay on top of their machine estate.

“The operators we deal with most certainly appreciate the importance of good maintenance,” he said. “If the machine is clean, all bulbs working, both coin mechanism and note acceptor operational with the latest firmware installed, then there is potential for the machine to earn money.”

Smith’s company has invested in its stock holding, training, logistics and PC systems to ensure that its services run efficiently to support its customers.

For Harald Wagemaker, sales director, EMEA, at components specialist Suzo-Happ, good maintenance is “vital” to operators’ business. His company has a stock of around 60,000 items and aims to be a “one-stop-shop” for spares and components, working with the likes of ELO touchscreens, FutureLogic and MEI. The quality of components continues to improve, meaning the product life of products is increasing also.

“It is not uncommon that the components outlive the machines themselves and are re-used,” he said. “Whether or not operators invest in the best components, that is an individual decision. But what we are seeing is an increased demand for the best components in the industry. Operators too face stronger competition and a way to differentiate themselves is to offer higher quality gaming or amusement.”

Sega Total Solutions is the spares and components division of Sega Amusements. The company supplies parts for all Sega equipment, as well as for the third-party equipment the company offers. The company is headed up by Peter Murphy, who suggested that it is something of a mixed picture when it comes to whether operators are aware of the benefits of good maintenance.





“Providing such a service is very important,” he said. “We monitor it on a daily basis and it’s a key part of the business. If we sell machines we have to give a very good after-sales service.”

One of the company’s most in demand services are its LCD replacement kits. These enable operators of older machines, whose monitors have perhaps stopped working or no longer look attractive, to replace them with a new LCD screen.

“The LCD kit can enhance a machine for perhaps another three or four years,” said Murphy. “We find operators are prepared to pay for that.”

Maintenance, said Steven Tan of Universal Space, is handled differently everywhere across the world. UNIS has expanded its parts and service arm globally, building a network of international distributors and distribution centres to allow for easy ordering systems and servicing support.

“Countries where game machines have been part of the entertainment marketplace for decades know to keep their machines in tip-top order at all times. They expect a very swift and sophisticated automated after-sales service with high quality replacement parts. Countries new to this type of entertainment industry have not perhaps grasped the importance of good maintenance but we are able to offer more personalised contact methods and individual assistance to ‘hold their hands’ as they move into these markets.”

All major manufacturers of peripherals and components sign up to the ‘innovate or die’ philosophy, explained E-service’s Paul Smith. “We regularly see updates and improvements to products as they evolve within the industry. New products are introduced that make use of the latest manufacturing techniques and materials, these products when first introduced can be expensive, as with everything price is key and this only reduces with the economy of scale.

“Operators of electronic gaming equipment understand that an investment has to be made in machine technology to both maximise cashbox take through player appeal and protect the cashbox from fraud.”

According to Suzo-Happ’s Wagemaker, the challenge for spares and components providers is to provide support locally all around the world.



“Suzo-Happ has always invested in a very strong sales team to support the local markets. Sometimes it is strategically wiser to team up with a local partner. The main focus is to offer the best local support possible.”

In Italy, for example, the company works with Comestero and recently signed an agreement in Greece for Million King to distribute and support its products there.

“The global footprint of the local support directly from Suzo-Happ will grow,” he added.

While Sega supplies some markets with spares directly, in others it works with trusted distributors that provide an after-sales service.

“It depends on the territory and the size of the distributor,” said Murphy. “Some become a sort of ‘middle man’ in supporting spares for that territory, while in others we supply directly to the customer. Either way there is an access to spares for all customers.”

Crucially, providing a spares service has enabled Sega to engage with operators in a new way. Said Sega Amusements’ Justin Burke: “It has allowed us to be close to the operators in our territories that before would have perhaps only seen us as a machines company and there wouldn’t have been much other contact. That was one of the reasons we launched a spares division; you learn about your customers and your products.”

Maintenance may in fact be a key consideration when purchasing a machine and so knowing that a comprehensive after-sales service is on offer can be the difference between making a sale or missing out. Steven Tan explained: “When you are looking at buying a car, to some extent you have to look beyond the ‘sales talk’ and the initial investment. You also make your decision to buy based on the ease of servicing/customer support and cost of repairs over the forthcoming years. So it is the same for buying an arcade or entertainment machine – there are other costs and considerations to take into account. A company such as UNIS will thrive not only on its products but on its after sales support; its good reputation will increase globally as it develops further into the US and European, as well as in our traditional Latin American and Asian markets.”

An after-sales service is “paramount,” said Suzo-Happ’s Wagemaker. “That is why Suzo-Happ has after-sales departments, particularly focused on supporting the end users.”

Clearly then, a game cabinet must not only be designed to attract players but to also ensure its future longevity. A manufacturer’s reputation for providing for an after-sales spares and repairs service, may be among a machine’s biggest selling points.



Harald Wagemaker - Suzo-Happ



Paul Smith - E-Service



Sega Total Solutions team