INSPIRATIONAL ENTERTAINMENT

Is there a blueprint for the perfect children's game or is it mostly luck? *InterGame* spoke with several of the industry's leading manufacturers to gain an insight into designing games for this important audience

DESIGNING games for the youngest players brings its own unique set of challenges, not least in creating products that are accessible and – above all – engaging. Tailoring games to children has its rewards, however, as the industry shifts away from catering to older children and teenagers towards offering entertainment for the whole family. And parents are happier for their children to play games that they feel are value for money and provide good, wholesome fun. Whether it is through redemption games, kiddie rides or video-based titles, entertaining this youngest of audiences is now an integral part of the amusement experience.

In recent years, the suggestion has been that the focus for manufacturers has shifted away from games that are aimed at the teenage market, typically video games, in favour of more family-orientated equipment, such as ticket redemption. This is partly a response to the decline in interest in pay-to-play video in the wake of affordable home game consoles, while at the same time demonstrating the industry's awareness of the growing need among families for entertainment that caters to a wider age group.

IG: Do you agree that there has been a shift within the amusement industry towards offering entertainment that caters to the whole family?

CHRIS CLIFTON, HARRY LEVY AMUSEMENTS:
"Entertainment that caters to the whole family has always been a core concept within the amusement industry; experience and advancements in technology have allowed us to capitalise on this. Things like linked games, shared features, clever design and simply turning a single-player machine into a multiplayer machine have proven to be a success."

STEVEN TAN, UNIS:
"I think the shift has been more of a division of the amusement market. Whereas five to 10 years ago there was a more even mix of machines, from kiddie machines, video and gambling, now many venues are streamlining and investing more in one sector, be that video gaming, casino-type machines or the children's market. At UNIS we know that many of our current clients are moving towards family entertainment - it offers better value for money play and can then bring in opportunities to support the venue's income with large family restaurants and play areas."

GARETH JONES, NORTHERN LEISURE:

"There seem to be a lot more FECs around these days and arcades seem to be incorporating more entertainment for the younger children, combined with amusements for the older end. As kiddie ride manufacturers, our aim is essentially towards the younger end. However, as an operator, we can also see that some products are now combining attractions which encourage children, siblings and parents to get involved together."

JUSTIN BURKE, SEGA AMUSEMENTS:

"I think it is probably the main market now. 15-20 years ago it was that teenage, male market but it is now wholeheartedly family in all sectors, FEC, bowling, arcades, seaside. When we design and create redemption games we don't specifically aim them at children but they are part of our thought process – we mustn't ignore that age group, in terms of the height of the screen, the controller and viewing lines. There's definitely a conscious consideration to all ages."

STEVE BRYANT, LAI GAMES:

"If you look at the majority of manufacturers they're trying to produce games that appeal to the widest audience possible, including the young ones. There is a lot of pressure on parents now to do something other than just giving them an iPad. Entertainment outside of the home for the whole family is critical. I think also, traditionally it is an area that we don't put a lot of attention on but if you keep that kind of age group occupied and happy, the parents are happy. It takes pressure off them and if you take children to a location with a broad range of equipment, as a parent, I'm happier."

TIZIANO TREDESE, ELMAC:

"In Italy, since 2002 we've realised that the pure city arcades or bowling centres with only video games were no longer profitable. So, we've started to introduce ticket redemption, because these games were easy to play for young customers... And the not so young!"

ANTHONY MANISCALCO, BENCHMARK GAMES:

"In most North American FECs the emphasis is on the older player demographic. Children's entertainment can be found at the inflatable locations and at national pizza chains. In South America, for instance, there are designated areas within the 'indoor park' that are clearly for children. They are populated with many kiddie rides, softplay and simple-play redemption equipment. So it really depends on the country."

NIGEL FRENCH, SOUND LEISURE:

"The industry has changed for the better, which is something which had to be done. Family pubs are springing up everywhere, as are FECs, here and abroad, which has seen a huge increase in our kid's games going into these facilities."

Ticket redemption has taken off in a big way globally, with even established amusement markets having embraced this type of gameplay. When it comes to installing new equipment, the question for every operator is whether the new game will warrant space on the floor and will provide an adequate income. Here, children's games, including redemption titles, are holding their own.

Do today's games specifically aimed at young children deliver competitive ROI for operators?

JACK COOK, BOB'S SPACE RACERS:

"Our customers are always looking for what we call 'toddler' type games. The ROI for these types of games is much different than true family games. If the game is a true toddler version, it is not the right size or gameplay for the rest of the family. If the game limits itself to toddler play then it limits the actual game ROI in comparison to games the whole family can play. Part of ROI is providing something for whole families. As such, a toddler game improves overall ROI by getting families in the door."

MANISCALCO:

"Whacking games, stomping games, soft-plastic ball games and water games have become increasingly popular with children. We have seen collections that indicate they earn very well but do not have the earning power of some of the newest video game titles or adult-oriented redemption equipment."

CLIFTON:

"It's about finding a balance; games aimed at younger children fill that niche and often cost less, offering an extremely competitive ROI. Younger children are less interested in specifics though, so it's key you don't have games competing against each other."

FRENCH:

"Over the last year we have been taking large orders from pub operators; our redemption/capsule machines are one of the lowest cost in these categories out there and the ROI is much quicker than the hi-tech arcade games out there. Children like them as they are colourful and simple to use."

TAN:

"The family market games that we produce are set at value prices so that within six to 12 months the operator should have return on their investment. Good family games are sought after in any FEC. Their income is stable and revenues collect over a long period of time."

JONES:

"Some machines which are aimed at young children can deliver exceptional ROI. We mainly manufacture rides aimed at pre-school but also some machines that would appeal to the slightly older audience, machines with incorporated video games, for example."

A manufacturer's design team must deliver a game that is both accessible, meaning young children can reach the control, see the playfield and perform the task required, and is easily understood. Designing an incredible game that is exciting and engaging is no good if the players cannot work out how to get started.

When we talk about game design, the term "intuitive gameplay" is often cited as a key requirement for children's games – but what does it mean in practice?

BURKE:

"It's the 'Holy Grail,' if a game is intuitive you've got half a chance. You come up with ideas that are great but need explaining to translate the idea to the player, which is never great. Intuitive gameplay is key but it is hard to find that quality. We sit around in a meeting once a month on our current and future titles and concepts and have those conversations – it's a great concept, but you've had to spend five minutes explaining to me how it works. That doesn't work in an arcade."

TAN:

"A game must show you how to get going, must lead you down the gameplay road so that you feel at ease with the controls and have a good idea of where to go. That doesn't mean that you give away everything within the first few minutes; in fact the player must have the opportunity to find new things, new tricks when they play, to keep their interest. The tricky thing with children's games is that your machine may have a target market of ages from two to eight years - that is a wide spectrum and so much research and development needs to be carried out to optimise the design so that is suits all."

COOK:

"We look at 'intuitive gameplay' as the player's ability to understand how to play without instructions. This is a very important feature for most markets we cover, as we want the player to know how to play just by looking at the game. Young players being able to understand the game is very important. Our design teams try to develop games that all ages can relate to easily. In general, we feel most players don't read instructions and if they do, they better be short and to the point."

BRYANT:

"Most parents now have touchscreen phones, iPads and tablets and the majority of young adults and children know how to use these items intuitively. We expect it and it has moved into our sector. Touchscreens are easy, you touch it and it does something for you. That's where that intuitiveness comes in. The application of that type of activity is so much more widespread and being applied to so many different styles of games. What does it mean in practice? It means an interface between the player and the game itself that they understand immediately."

JONES:

"When designing a new ride the first thing we think about are the aesthetics. The appearance has to appeal to our audience. We then think about the features or interaction we may wish to incorporate. The interaction must be simple enough for the young children to navigate, but also engaging enough for them to want to play again and again. If it's a game to be played, then it has to be easy enough that the child gets the feeling of success, that they are 'actually quite good at this game,' but not so easy that there are no challenges left to stimulate the player or objectives left to achieve."

It is widely acknowledged that a considerable part of the attraction of pay-to-play amusements is the prospect of winning a prize – a whole prize industry in its own right has grown up around the sector. When it comes to young children, however, the prize element is still a factor but appears to be less important. The act of playing is itself the major draw, hence the popularity of mechanical redemption games that require physical interaction to achieve an objective. That there is a prize as a reward for achieving this goal is often seen as an added bonus. The older children become, the more interested they are in the cumulative effect of collecting tickets to redeem against prizes.

How important is the "reward for play" concept, either as tickets or prizes of some kind, with this age group?

TREDESE:

"To redeem tickets into prizes is important but, in my opinion, more important is to give time to play."

BRYANT:

"At the very bottom end they play stuff just for the hell of it. They play games because they are fun. When children get older they enjoy the collectability of tickets in order to win a major prize. As a parent, if I can see there is a game they have a chance of winning something from I'll probably be happier to let them have a go at that than one that doesn't."

BURKE:

"I think it is important; I think it is less important for younger players, they're more interested in having a great 30 seconds of fun and interaction. There has always got to be gameplay that is worthy of standing on it own two feet, regardless of whether you win tickets."

COOK:

"The younger the age group the less value is needed, as they are just happy to 'win something.' With that said it is more important to reward them as much value as possible so the parents will see the value. While the children are happy with plastic rings and pencils the parents are not amused if the value is not there."

MANISCALCO:

"The reward is not as important as the experience. If the game can create a frenzied repetitious challenge for the child the game has a good chance of succeeding. 'Whacking' games are the perfect example."

TAN:

"Children love prizes and redemption tickets, they love walking around clutching them and they love feeding tickets into the ticket eater. It is all part of the enjoyment factor of playing the entertainment games. The token prize that they win remains a memento of their day to take home and proudly display in their bedroom."

One of the key features of children's games is the fact that parents often play the games with their children, helping them to understand the game or develop the skills required to achieve the objective. The extent to which manufacturers design games specifically for children or as experiences parents and children can share varies, but there is a general awareness that in order to deliver titles that generate significant income in this segment, they need to offer something that either parents are keen to play or, at the very least, are happy to allow their children to play.

Do parents and children play games alongside one another? If so, is it important to offer something for parents too?

COOK:

"In most of my observations, the parents are content to play along with their children for some period of time, especially the younger ages. This includes helping the kids or playing the next game to teach them how to play. When the kids are older, the parents need games around them to entertain themselves."

BURKE:

"I certainly play alongside my kids and I think you see that a lot. From my own experience, more often than not you're playing behind them, possibly guiding them. You're the backseat driver. There are games where both of you can play. It is very much a unique arcade experience that you can't get anywhere else."

MANISCALCO:

"Parents understand that the children lack skill. They play with the child to teach and ultimately get as many tickets as they can for their price of admission. At the end of the visit they need to redeem as many tickets as they can to conclude the visit on good note and a prize. In North America, FEC prize centres offer much higher value prizes than other countries, so older players do value tickets. In South America, most prize counters do not offer any items that would appeal to anyone over 12 years old. So the older players gravitate to the video games."

TAN:

"Having two or four-player games does offer a family fun environment, playing with a sibling or a parent adds to the experience of the day out. The parents are usually very happy to play at the children's level, and the children are usually very happy to beat their parents at the game!"

FRENCH:

"We see parents challenging their children on our games, but just because they are simple games does not mean they are easy. Making the games too easy would stop this. Making the games a little harder will make the parents have a go!"

BRYANT:

"As a manufacturer we try and broaden the audience as much as we can. There is plenty of scope to produce games where the parent can play together quite easily. I think certainly with the activity-based and skill-based games, they are good levelers. It doesn't mean either the child or parent is going to be better than the other – that's where you get that stimulated repeat play."

Games that feature simple objectives have traditionally been strong performers within this segment, but as children become more tech-savvy, are new games becoming increasingly sophisticated?

STEVEN TAN, UNIS:

"It is true that children are now very used to playing on home entertainment games, on game apps etc, but we have found our most successful games are still basically simple but well designed. The length of an entertainment game in, for example, an FEC is longer than a play on a gambling machine, but the gameplay is still shorter than console games and therefore you have limits. Most of our younger children's games are not digital and therefore being tech-savvy is not an issue."

STEVE BRYANT, LAI GAMES:

"Your first thought is 'yes, we have to put more content into our games,' but in order to give them something different to all of these multi-level games they play on their consoles, it is probably more beneficial to our industry to keep things simple. We want players to be on a game for between three and five minutes, making a game more complicated it makes the game time longer. We want to give value to the players so they feel they are getting a

good game for their money, but conversely we want it to finish fairly quickly so they put more money back in. If you go down the route of making a game too sophisticated you're in danger of potentially narrowing your audience."

JUSTIN BURKE, SEGA AMUSEMENTS:

"Some clearly do, but you still can't beat a simple throw a ball, spin of a wheel, shooting at targets. It's hard to beat that kind of fun."

GARETH JONES, NORTHERN LEISURE:

"It has been noted within our sector that the age range of children using kiddie rides has declined over the years. Riders are younger now than those who were riding back in, say, the late '90s or even early 2000s. I feel that this is because of the reasons stated in your question. Children are developing technological experience much sooner now, which demands sophisticated and more challenging objectives creating a larger gap in entertainment which appeals to both infant and junior age ranges."