Skill testing

Designing successful skill games is not as simple as it may seem, writes *Simon Liddle*

OFFERING the opportunity to progress through several levels of difficulty or to achieve a task and be rewarded with a prize or tickets provides a great deal of appeal for players of all ages. Designing a skill game that is neither too easy nor too difficult is a key objective and can help deliver a real return on investment for operators.

There are a host of skill-based amusement games available on the market, some more successful than others. There are common design themes, however, with the majority of games drawing on only a handful of different skill requirements. What makes a successful skill game is not as simple as it seems, however.

"Skill games should be, first and foremost, engaging and exciting," said Steven Tan of UNIS. "They need to allow the player to feel that they have control over the game, they need to look easy to use and to straight forward to operate."

The "overwhelming factor" in what makes a skill game successful, said Steve Bryant of LAI Games, is that it is immediately obvious what the player has to do and gives the impression that the objective is within reach. "It's that hook; that believability that the prize is achievable," he said.

Over the years, LAI has found tremendous success with the genre-defining game, Stacker.

"It kind of set the trend," Bryant continued. "There were two earlier games that set the way for LAI, Time Buster and Lighthouse, which had limited success. Stacker really gave the players a game they thought they could win and the operators a way of actually managing the skill expectation - they could offer a good game and earn decent money out of it."

Today, the company has a range of skill-based games, among which one of the most successful has been Balloon Buster, a carnival-themed prize merchandiser.

"In a true skill game," said Tom Kane of Betson, "it always comes down to hand-eye coordination. How to challenge and test the talent is what is more fluid."

The formula for designing games, he explained, is relatively simple.

"A quick-play unit must provide the opportunity for a rich reward. A longer playing, greater play experience unit can have a more stable reward offering."

Fishbowl Frenzy, which Betson is distributing on behalf of Team Play, is a newcomer to this category of games. It incorporates a 65ins 3D monitor and a win celebration that, as earnings are demonstrating, commands extensive repeat play. This title, along with games such as Monster Drop from Benchmark and Big Bass Wheel from Bay Tek, are "somewhat hybrids," Kane said.

"The length of play and thus entertainment experience, are reasonably long, yet the units still offer the potential of a very rich reward. It is the best of both worlds for the player."

The best skill games offer a clear task to the player, which looks achievable, said John Crompton of Bandai Namco.

"At Namco, we had a team of experienced game designers look extensively at the sector and they came to the conclusion that players prefer electro-mechanical style games, where they feel they can control the result through their reactions."

Using these findings, the company developed a range of skill-based games, including Pac-Man Smash, Goal Line Rush, Triple Turn and Pac-Man Swirl.

"We also recently signed an exclusive distribution deal for Snow Down from Jennison, which is one of the best skill games on the market right now," Crompton added.

According to Anthony Maniscalco, "timing" games have been the most successful for his company, Benchmark Games. "Whether it's coin roll-down (Roll for Gold) or ball drop (Slam-A-Winner), a timing game allows the player to get better with each play. Eventually, the player becomes skilled and feels like they can win. That is most important element to Benchmark games being strong earners."

Many skill-based games require only a single action from the player but that does not mean they cannot offer something more. In order to stand out, games must offer a compelling experience.

"Often," said Tan, "the most successful games are those where the skill element is not the primary selling point of the machine. Over the past few years we have been using different sensory elements that create family fun games, but where skill is an important attribute required by the player."

Last year, UNIS launched Up and Away, a game that uses air blasting guns to move balls up a track into the target holes. Its water games – Ducky Splash, Frost Island and Squirt A Gator – require skill to aim and shoot the water guns.

"I feel the important thing is to find ways to keep these games fresh and interesting and yet keep the basics of the gameplay clean and simple," added Tan.

"Sometimes," said Crompton, "the simplest looking games can be the most complex to create. It is always a challenge to come up with a new way of playing a skill game that looks easy for the player to achieve but in fact is a bit trickier than expected."

Creating any new game is always challenging, said Maniscalco. "Creating a skill game is even more challenging as you must demonstrate that the required action results in a

desired result on demand, not every once in a while," he explained. "Benchmark games are certified by a testing lab to be true games of skill. There is no random number generator in our games' programming that determines the play outcome. This certification is required by some countries and jurisdictions as a prerequisite of operation."

Designing a straightforward, simple play experience that is both hugely entertaining and worthy of repeat play is a complex business. If it were easy, everyone would be producing hit after hit.

"We had Stacker originally six years ago and we would love to recreate that kind of euphoric success every year if we could, but it's not that easy," admitted Bryant. "Other manufacturers come up with similar ideas and a variation of the theme but ultimately they're all skill-stop orientated, whether it be video or mechanical, it is still of that nature. It is an action that you need to do to a certain point or stop at a certain point. Coming up with various different formats of that is incredibly hard and a lot of the time there is no rhyme or reason why a game is successful – often it can be contrary to what you think."

Complicated and more technically advanced designs can bring fresh ideas to the market, but potentially limits the audience and buyers.

"Quite clearly one of the things that helps to make a game successful is its price and what you can sell it for," Bryant said. "The more complicated the game, the more elements there are in the creativity, then you move into an area where it will only fit into one category or another because of the purchase price. People will only buy ticket redemption games up to a certain level, after that it needs to give out a prize because that will always earn more money."

So, is trying to reinvent the wheel when it comes to skill-based games actually counter-productive?

"You can't beat familiarity," said Justin Burke of Sega. "If

people already know how to play a game, it is a huge bonus. Everyone is trying to re-invent the wheel to find that thing that will have people saying 'we never thought of that' but there is a common theme. It falls into that area where it's important to keep it simple."

ICE's Skill Wall range of carnival games, which Sega distributes, are strong examples of skill-based games that, thanks to their traditional styles of play, are immediately familiar to players. These include Milk Jug Toss, Down The Clown and the new Gold Fishin'.

"They offer hands-on, tactile gameplay – you can't beat that," Burke said.

The question of whether designs can become too radical is one that Bryant considered: "In this quest to reinvent ourselves and come up with the next great idea, do we make the games more complicated? Are they no longer immediately obvious to the player?

"The simplest games are the most successful; the best games really are the ones that, from any distance, you can look at know exactly what you have to do to win. They've got that believability about them, which is why, certainly in recent years, I believe mechanical games have always proven to be better earners than video-based games. From our experience, mechanical-based skill games seem to catch people's attention more because they believe they are controlling the game."

Commenting on this idea, Tan said: "You need to re-invent skill games, as in using different ideas to attract the player to begin with, but the actual heart of the game's design, which is centred around the skill elements required, will remain very much the same. This process has evolved over many years, it is a fundamental formula that does not stray much from its original path."

Skill games may incorporate tried and tested methods of play, but there is a reason these endure – players evidently can't get enough of them.
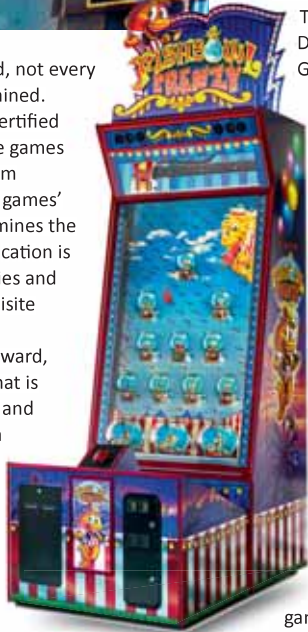
"New ideas are always welcome in game design," said Crompton, "however, the classic light stopping, ball dropping, stomping and whacking games will always be popular with players."

Making progress

STRIKING a balance between simple, straightforward objectives and compelling gameplay is essential when it comes to developing successful skill-based games. Incorporating levels of progression is key to ensuring that players keep coming back to play again and again.

"Progression is what encourages repeat play. The player needs to have a target to aim for, but also to feel encouraged by progress made. Once the game has come to an end, the mix of wanting to do better and knowing that they can progress means they will be enthused to have another go."
Steven Tan, UNIS

"If you consider it from the player's perspective, they're looking for more of a game. I think that progressive nature of it gives you that option to extend the game time. We're going back to that value aspect that gives players that feel-good feeling that, even when they've spent their money and walked away with nothing, they want to come back and have another go."
Steve Bryant, LAI

"Repeat play is very important and that comes down to enjoying the game and whether the player gets a good return on their pound, dollar or euro. You need that enjoyment factor, maybe winning something, but the game needs its own strengths, not just paying out tickets and becoming a vending machine. It should also appeal to the biggest audience possible."
Justin Burke, Sega