

Wireless World: Mobile game 'communities' emerge

November 18 2005

Mobile-game providers are now deploying technology to create wireless "gaming communities," where players can interact with each other, all from their mobile phone, a promising telecom phenomenon that may make a \$1 billion market in the next three years, experts tell United Press International's Wireless World.

This week Virgin Mobile reached a deal with Durham, N.C.-based Motricity, a mobile content enabled solutions provider, to create a mobile "players club" that will furnish users with an array of online games that they can play with friends -- or through which they can meet new pals.

The idea is to extend "mobile gaming into a connected mobile experience," said Ryan Wuerch, chairman and chief executive officer of Motricity. "We expect mobile gaming to reach \$1 billion by 2009, presenting a significant opportunity for Virgin Mobile USA and other wireless carriers."

Mobile phones have been seen as new gaming and content platforms for a few years by industry visionaries. But the idea of creating virtual communities -- borrowed from the Internet -- is taking the trend to a new plane. New handheld technologies are emerging, and third-generation wireless networks are being offered by an array of carriers here and abroad.

Companies that are already active in the PC or game platform businesses

-- like Primedia and iD software -- are actively eying the new mobile niche, seeking to create communities where otherwise geographically distant people can communicate. Globally, games for mobile phones are a \$2.6 billion business this year, according to Informa Telecoms and Media, a research consultancy. The market for mobile communities -- interactive groups -- will be sales in addition to that total.

Primedia Content this week disclosed that it had reached an agreement to buy 50 percent of AirGames Entertainment, a specialist maker of gaming products and services based in South Africa. Also based in South Africa, Primedia already is in the PC business through its holding of Ster-Kinekor Games but is now seeking to expand internationally and work with game developers and motion-picture studios.

The maker of the famed role-playing game Doom this week also announced that it is going mobile. The firm, iD Software, reached a deal with Jamdat Mobile Inc., a game publisher, to bring Doom to the mobile market in the United Kingdom, rolling it out on wireless networks provided by O2, Orange, T-Mobile and Vodafone.

The company is taking the "classic elements that made the Doom franchise a worldwide blockbuster, and translates them into an exciting, made-for-mobile content experience," said Mitch Lasky, chairman and chief executive officer of Jamdat Mobile, based in Los Angeles.

The mobile-gaming communities concept gives consumers access to what is called inter-carrier mobility functionality, which means that they can play games, not just on their own mobile device, but can network with others, on other phone networks, and play with them too. Technology developed by Motricity enables gamers to search out worthy opponents -- giving them player profiles to view, ratings generated by other end-users, reviews, referrals, buddy lists and leader boards, for nerd-to-nerd discussions.

"Subscribers are already seeking their favorite games on carriers' decks, but access to a mobile community where they share their passions and interests is what brings them back time and time again," said David Buckley, vice president and general manager of community services for Motricity.

There are also links to other game providers, like Digital Chocolate, Gameloft and GLU, for the community-enablement of their games. The first games being offered on the Virgin network, for example, include GLU's "Deer Hunter," Gameloft's "Derek Jeter Baseball" and Digital Chocolate's "Johnny Crash."

There are some 3 million subscribers for the mobile virtual network operator (MVNO), Virgin Mobile USA. The software developer, Motricity, which is working with Virgin, and others, is attracting a massive amount of investor attention, garnering investment rounds of \$30 million and \$27 million during the last year, the company said. "We are seeing consistent proof that these (virtual) communities attract increased revenues," said Buckley.

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