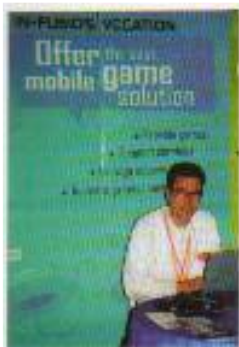


## Mobile gaming advances in France

Game developers, handset manufacturers, and network operators come together at Paris's Mobile Entertainment 2001 expo to swap new ideas and business models



Big licences were all the rage at the event with Digital Bridges especially proud of the fact that it had acquired 'Star Trek' rights



Giles Corbett, of In-Fusio, was showing off the company's ExEn technology, which enables users to download games onto their handsets without needing to run Java

The first thing you notice is the lack of thrash metal and girls in sports bras. Being weaned on 'conventional' game shows like E3 and ECTS doesn't prepare you for the sedate quiet of Paris's Mobile Entertainment 2001. But then it's hard to justify Jordan and Limp Bizkit when your product roster is Tic-Tac-Toe, or some glorified version of scissors-paper-stone. The real fireworks at this show were taking place in the conference sessions. That is, if you can describe mild carping about technical standards and how WAP was marketed as fireworks.

The emerging wireless game development community certainly has its gripes. British game studios which made the trip out to Paris (including Digital Bridges, Kuju, Purple, IOMO and others) lined up alongside their Nordic counterparts (Springtoys, Picofun, Codeonline, Akumitti) to harangue handset companies and mobile networks for not following the DoCoMo lead and making it financially worthwhile to develop killer mobile games.

What it boils down to it this: In Japan i-Mode has created a business model in which developers are incentivised to create great applications by the fact that they receive 91 per cent of subscription fees. Meanwhile, customers get phones with 256-colour screens and a single,

community oriented service. Result: there are 21 million i-Mode subscribers, and on average they subscribe to 2.2 sites.

Europe isn't quite the same. WAP has confused and disappointed the public, while game developers have been largely ignored by networks which betray an alarming lack of interest in entertainment on phones.

### Money matters

Meanwhile those who have succeeded in getting a game online have yet to see much return. There was little talk of payment at the show, but there was a bit of 'we offer a mix of fees, shared revenues and royalties - it depends on the individual case', which can be safely translated as 'we're eating up our seed capital and not earning much'.

However, Orange, Vizzavi, and Genie were all visible at the show, and have each appointed game industry insiders to run their entertainment divisions. Indeed, the mere existence of the show is testament itself that there is a real industry here.

But if developers have concerns with the networks, they don't always present a united front. For instance, the broad consensus is that the kind of simple games best suited to today's handsets should be hosted on the server. This is the view held by Digital Bridges, for example. The Scottish company develops games, encourages

others to do so to a set of proprietary APIs and hosts them on its own Unity servers. So far it has 40 studios in its developer programme and 21 operator deals. Others, notably France's In-Fusio, see things differently. It believes that decent graphical games can be run from today's handsets and came up with ExEn, a technology which shrinks games to tens of kilobytes - small enough to be run from any GSM phone.

Giles Corbett, managing director of In-Fusio, says: "We took the basic architecture of Java virtual machine, removed anything that wasn't absolutely necessary, and added a bunch of stuff. The result is a console equivalent for mobile phones. It's a logical stepping stone while waiting for phones powerful enough to run Java."

At the show, however, the majority of games on offer were text-based or offered graphical flourishes to a textual structure, the pick of the bunch probably being Picofun's yooof-orientated *Lifestylers*.

Conventional game publishers, nevertheless, don't seem interested, and were conspicuously absent. Their only presence was second hand, in the form of





Activision's *Zork* and *Star Trek* games on the Digital Bridges stand, versions of Eidos's *Who Wants To be A Millionaire?* and *Gangsters* (courtesy of Codeonline and Nokia respectively) and THQ's prototype games with Siemens. It seems the publishing role in this market will logically be with the networks. But while they dither, it has fallen to Nokia and the aforementioned Digital Bridges to take it on. Nokia has 300,000 WAP developers signed up to its Nokiatforum programme (80 of them specialise in games) and has sold its service to three operators.

Nokia loomed large over this show, as it has over others. It's certainly brave to take on a publishing role, coming as it does from a manufacturing background. Among its handset rivals, Motorola has set itself up as a technology partner for developers which does not seek to host games. Siemens also has a developer programme but confesses it doesn't want to build an in-house game resource, preferring to outsource hosting.

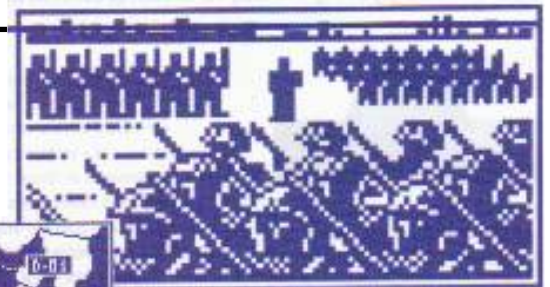
## Hyping handsets

However, all three (plus Ericsson, also exhibiting) are, at heart, handset manufacturers. So, for all the fine talk of concentrating on what we can do now and moving away from games industry orthodoxy of fixation on next-gen technology, they still were keen to show off their innovations. This took the form of *Snowboarding*, a 16bit-type game running from a memory card on the £500 Nokia Communicator, *Driver* playing on a prototype Ericsson 3G handset (but actually running on a nearby notebook linked by Bluetooth), and, inexplicably, a 3D headset showing a THQ POD racer on the Siemens stand.

These were rare hints at 3G. Otherwise,

there was a definite reluctance to dwell on UMTS. Java is another story. All the major developers are excited about the gameplay possibilities of Java-enabled handsets (which will be launched before the end of the year) and have projects in progress.

The question is; will more graphics merely tempt the mobile industry to put scaled-down console games on phones? Everyone is agreed that this would be a mistake. After all, the great potential of wireless is its appeal to the people of all ages and both genders. But you couldn't help but notice that, already, there are an awful number of golf and football games in the pipeline.



Realtime strategy title *Mobilization*, from Helsinki-based Springtoys, is typical of the current wireless offerings, though things look set to change soon

