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Greg Karaolis is the head of product at SBTech. Having spent over 10 years in both online gaming and as an Arsenal season ticket holder, he is passionate about building platforms interfaces and experiences that will excite and engage sports fans and punters.

Featuring: SBTech

SBTech: The future is now

Greg Karaolis of SBTech examines the future of the egaming industry and highlights the obstacles which will need to be overcome along the way.

eGaming Review (EGR): How pivotal has in-play become to egaming? Why?

Greg Karaolis (GK): The importance of in-play betting to the trillion dollar a year global sports betting industry is no secret. Industry players with the strongest in-play offering have seen themselves catapulted to the forefront of the global online market in the last 10 years, and almost every operator now has over 50% of sports revenues from in-play betting with some as high as 80%.

Why has this happened? From the user perspective, betting in-play is a more compelling and engaging way for sports fans to get entertainment value, rather than the more traditional pre-match bets. Punters have more information, more options, and crucially, more interest once a game is in-play. This has dovetailed with better sports television coverage over the last decade and faster broadband speeds, ultimately allowing for live streaming and minimal bet delay to really enhance the live betting proposition.

EGR: What features have been key in the rise of in-play?

GK: Put simply, the key features can be thought of as performance and content/information. Cloud-based push services, improvements to models and faster settlement feeds have all meant that pricing delays are minimal. As well as meaning that users will see prices that marry up with events they see happening, it means issues around bet rejections, and some players being able to abuse bookmakers by having a faster feeds have all but disappeared for most sports and leagues. Operators feel confident in offering more markets across more sports and leagues and punters have a great experience where bets are not rejected and settled quickly in game.

An improvement in both mobile and desktop CPUS has also helped. Today they are more powerful so they can deal with more betting information (admittedly operators should also strive to make their applications lightweight, even when they have hundreds of in-play events with hundreds of betting markets each).

The challenge to make the live betting experience lightweight is not as easy as initially thought, especially given that the other key inclusions are content and information. As late as 2012, tier one operators were reporting that adding simple scoreboards to in-play events caused turnover to increase by 25%. Now we have visualisations and live streaming, which helps keep the in-play experience engaging and the bet stimulating.

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EGR: How do you create a market leading in-play product?

GK: To create any good product, you need to put the user at the heart of it. To do this, you need to understand what in-play bettors want, and that is quick fire entertainment to complement their sporting interest. As well as a great user experience, there are a few must-haves needed for a market leading product:

- Live statistics, scoreboards and visualisations are essential in keeping players engaged and also gives them a reason to bet
- Live streaming is also important, though on iOS devices the inability to show split screen portrait streaming does impact betting numbers. Nonetheless, if punters know they can follow the game if they bet, there is a real concrete customer benefit for them to bet and stay on your site
- Quick-fire entertainment are fast markets that expire in a minute and settle immediately in order to give customers the ability to keep turning over their funds and are very engaging. I'm sure that these markets will continue to grow

as the potential of some of the sports most suited for in-play has not really been realised because of the focus on football. American football, darts and even golf are in many ways far better suited to a fast market type betting experience than football, although it still retains the focus. It is no coincidence that tennis betting has risen so sharply when it is so well suited to in-play betting. And as feeds and models improve for other similarly well-suited sports expect more fast markets across these sports too

• A strong live cash out product. As well as being good value, this is about making sure cash out is kept available to the customer for as long as possible. For example, there are many in the industry that suspend betting and cash out at corner in football. But this is precisely the time when a punter might be getting nervous about their bet and would want to cash out.

EGR: In-play often restricts punters to betting on a single stream, how can this be avoided?

GK: On desktop this is somewhat easier. Many in the industry already have multi-view functionality which allows punters to follow up to eight live streams at once. On mobile, the limited screen space presents a challenge. There is a huge significance being placed on ways to notify punters of other interesting games. I won't go into using big data for personalisation and recommendations, but a simple alerts-style service can help to at least remind users to check on other games they are interested in.

EGR: How does in-play plan to keep up with the rapid rate of technology advancement?

GK: The bookmakers that don't make the most of the technology will simply be the ones that are left by the wayside. More powerful mobile devices and improved 3G/4G speeds have made mobile streaming an industry standard when a few years back there would have been many issues with trying to provide this kind of a service. As for keeping up with the rapid rate of technology advancement, this is about looking outside of our industry and seeing how we can best make use of them in our own way.

EGR: Other than technological developments, what features can we expect to be introduced to in-play over the next five years?

GK: As more sports begin to put emphasis on improving the quality and reliability of feeds, I'd expect more operators to begin evaluating new

in-play markets and offerings on the entertainment quality available rather than just focusing on the 'big sports'. I believe that a bespoke, tailored offering for golf would be a game-changer: "Will Spieth sink this putt to take the lead?" Alternatively, for sports such as darts or American football you could even introduce roulette-style interfaces in which the customer hits where the next three darts will go or how many yards will be made in a specific play.

The next innovation that I really can't wait for is VR sports betting. The idea of watching El Classico on your oculus feeling like you are at the stadium while getting bet prompts would be really engaging. There are many challenges to overcome here including licensing, performance and latency before even tackling the product journey itself. I would like to think we will see some kind of a proof of concept in the next three to five years but we are probably some way off this becoming used in mainstream in-play betting anytime soon.

EGR: What key industry trends will be of the most significance to the industry over the next five years?

GK: Needless to say, the industry needs to be mobile first. With in-play betting now constituting the lion's share of online sports betting and with credible stats that show engaging punters with content, visuals and data increases betting activity, we have a good path for the way forward.

As the industry becomes ever more recreational, the average punter is increasingly looking for a more casino like and gamified experience. And, it is little surprise given the attention span of the average human is estimated to be as low as eight seconds, according to some researchers.

As well as gamification, true personalisation and recommendation will play a big role. Operators have so many events and so much coverage but the key will be to make sure users not see only what is most likely to convert them, but more importantly what is likely to upsell them. And this is more than just showing a different marketing banner to different segments. This is about the right message with the right bet stimulating data at the right time. Operators or platforms that have been trading for at least three to five years and amassed a wealth of customer and transactional data will be well placed to start leveraging their big data to create bespoke interfaces that don't just do basic personalisation based on geography or VIP segment, but that will deliver bespoke journeys and interfaces to almost every customer. ◆