

## TV Producer Walks Casual Route to Video Games

By BOOYEON LEE - 3/3/2008

Los Angeles Business Journal Staff

The production company behind TV shows "Deal or No Deal," "Fear Factor" and "Extreme Makeover" is making a foray into casual gaming, or video games played on computers and mobile devices.

Endemol USA in West Hollywood has appointed Eric LaVanchy to the new post of director of gaming.

The company plans on tapping its connections with Hollywood producers to roll out computer- and mobile-based video games based upon its 1,100 entertainment titles.

The first offerings, to be distributed later this year, will be casual game spinoffs of shows "Deal or No Deal" and "1 vs. 100."

It's a logical move for Endemol, which has already had market success in the online gaming world, said Jon Vlassopoulos, the company's senior vice president of digital media and branded entertainment.

Endemol has long licensed its properties to video game companies and has already seen 1.5 million downloads across its titles. It has also dabbled in casual game production for its online animation site, JoeCartoon.com.

Endemol's segue into the video game industry follows the trend of media companies, such as Disney Corp. and Viacom, that have bought or built video game operations.

Casual gaming provides for easy entry, compared to console games. They are typically played on computers or mobile devices, while console games require platforms such as PlayStation and Xbox.

"Production costs for top titles on console platforms are comparable to movie budgets, whereas it costs a small fraction of that to create compelling casual games," said LaVanchy, previously managing director of the Ritz Club London Online. Prior to that, he founded New York-based Bottle Rocket, an online game developer acquired by ACTV and now a part of OpenTV.

LaVanchy is the sole member of Endemol USA's casual games unit for the moment. But the company will be hiring at least a dozen people to staff technical, creative and business development positions. They will work closely with Endemol's London-based games division, which also consists of about a dozen people.

Parent company Endemol, based in the Netherlands, grossed \$1.5 billion in revenues in 2006. Its U.S. operations employ 100 people in Los Angeles and 50 in New York.

### Out on the Town

It's a social networking Web site that wants people to get off the computer.

Since most social networking sites survive by monetizing eyeballs on advertised content, this concept seems odd.

Zach Suchin, founder and chief executive of College Tonight Inc., is well aware of this, noting, "It clashes with the common notion of generating revenue online."

Suchin said CollegeTonight.com is not a "photo album," but an "interactive social networking site more concerned with keeping people out doing real social networking."

It works like this: Mark catches Jenny staring at him in class and he doesn't know whether it's because of his bad haircut or good looks. Mark inputs Jenny's name into CollegeTonight.com, and later gets a message from the Web site that Jenny is going to a fraternity party that's been organized through the site. Mark now has an option of getting Jenny on the

phone through CollegeTonight, which uses third-party software to dial Jenny's anonymously generated number. "This would depend on Jenny's privacy settings. She may allow people to text her through CollegeTonight as well," Suchin said.

CollegeTonight revenue streams come from both on- and offline advertising. For example, bars, clubs and restaurants near college campuses are advertisers. The Web site also sells tickets to offline events, offers photo printing services, and leverages corporate branding with companies such as Subaru and Olympus.

The company wants to build a client base in a way that "doesn't lasso users to a computer screen," Suchin said.

L.A.-based College Tonight launched in November and employs six people. It was created as a reverse merger under Atlanta-based Simex Technologies Inc., a publicly traded company with a market cap of \$13 million.

### **And the Winner Is ...**

Nine local tech companies will be vying for the fifth annual Entrepreneurship Awards hosted by PricewaterhouseCoopers and Entretch on Thursday.

For the category of companies under \$1 million in sales, the finalists are L.A.-based EdgeCast Networks Inc., a music and video download network; Calando Pharmaceuticals Inc., a biotech subsidiary of Pasadena-based nanotechnology development subsidiary Arrowhead Research Corp.; and the Rubicon Project, an online advertising technology firm.

For companies with revenues up to \$8 million, the top three contenders are Pasadena-based Central Desktop, which makes an Internet application that streamlines online data; L.A.-based Nami Media Inc., which makes a platform that aggregates sponsored search traffic; and Santa Monica-based Zag, a B-to-B car shopping site.

The three finalists for the category of companies that generate more than \$8 million are Pasadena-based eHarmony, a popular dating site; Monrovia's Green Dot Corp., a prepaid retail debit card company; and Vantage Media Corp., a Venice-based search marketing firm.

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