

# The ambition to succeed

Murka is one of the only social casino developers to have launched a male-focused slots game. Chief exec Anton Krasnyy tells *EGR NA* why the opportunity is huge



**M**urka is a small social casino developer, but what it lacks in size it more than makes up for in ambition. With offices in the Ukraine and California, the firm plans to boost its roll call of 120 employees in the coming months as it looks to launch more products and new games. But being small has its advantages when it comes to innovation, and the firm is on the cusp of rolling out a new poker game format.

To date, its Scatter Slots app has performed well, ranking 14th in Adam Krejcik's Q4 Social Casino Tracker with total revenues of \$10.1m – up 320% YoY. But unlike most of these types of games in the market, Scatter Slots has been developed specifically for male players. Murka CEO Anton Krasnyy believes the demographic provides a huge opportunity, but admits he was surprised by Scatter Slots' appeal among female players too.

Although focused on slots and poker for the time being, the developer is keeping a close eye on daily fantasy sports, in particular whether a viable free-to-play model can exist for the sector. Murka's team of developers are also busy experimenting with virtual reality and smart TVs, which many in the industry believe will become the next social casino battleground.

Here, Krasnyy talks in more detail about his firm's product pipeline, and why he believes taking a fresh approach is key to building a sustainable and profitable social casino business.

**EGR North America (EGR NA):** Can you give us a little background on Murka?

**Anton Krasnyy (AK):** Murka was founded in 2011 by myself and my co-founder Max Polyakov. We have two development offices in Ukraine and are headquartered in Menlo Park, California, where Max lived and I moved recently. We have an excellent team of 120 people and we are actively hiring right now so we will have expanded our team by the end of the year. We are considering ourselves as a mobile social casino developer and we develop casino games for free-to-play markets.

**EGR NA:** Your game library focuses primarily on slots. Will you look to enter other verticals such as casino and bingo, and what are your thoughts on eSports?

**AK:** Most of the social casino market is slots and they are the type of games most players want to see. Even if it's a casino game – DoubleDown Casino, for example – where they offer poker, bingo, blackjack and so on, players will still spend 90% of the time playing slots. But we do offer other types of game. We have a Texas hold 'em poker game, with a new poker product coming this year. We also launched Cheeky Bingo as part of a joint venture project with bwin.party.

As for eSports, Murka will not move into this market but I am personally a fan of eSports and I follow it. I think eSports has a big future as gamers

(like myself) become older they want to entertain themselves with the recognizable activity, and eSports is fun to watch.

**EGR NA: But why is it not something Murka will get involved with? How about daily fantasy sports? Could a social model work?**

**AK:** As a company we don't want to lose our focus on the social casino vertical, and that is why we have decided not to move into any other market. But taking into consideration that fantasy sports is betting by nature and betting is part of the social casino sector, we might develop a fantasy sports game one day. Developers are yet to crack a free to play social/mobile fantasy sports product, and fantasy sports is a super social activity so we see plenty of opportunities in the long term.

**EGR NA: Scatter Slots has performed well in recent months – what is driving growth in the game?**

**AK:** Scatter Slots has posted growth for the past 12 months, and we will continue our market expansion throughout the coming year. The main driver of growth for any social game is marketing, and for Scatter Slots it has been no different. We spend a lot of money on user acquisition, but the reason for this is that we have a great game with an innovative combination of best-looking graphics, interesting progression gameplay and unique in-game mechanics. We created Scatter Slots with a male audience in mind, and feel we have hit our target. Commonly slots games have an 80/20 female/male audience split, but in Scatter Slots it is 50/50.

**EGR NA: Why did you target the male demographic? What were the challenges in creating a game that would appeal to males but without putting off your core female audience?**

**AK:** Most of the social casino games have cartoonish and vivid graphics, and this attracts female players. The male audience is widely ignored by social casino developers, so we saw it as a free space for us to occupy. Ninety percent of characters inside Scatter Slots are female characters created with fantasy/RPG art style, which is what sets us apart and makes Scatter Slots unusual in the market.

When I decided to develop a male-oriented game, I thought that it will have 90% male players but to our surprise we have very dedicated female players who are asking us to create more male characters for them, which we are doing right now.

## “” When you become bigger it's hard to stay flexible, and there is less room for innovation

**EGR NA: What are you doing to take share away from industry titans Playtika, Double-Down and Big Fish? Or have you identified a more niche market?**

**AK:** We are not doing anything in particular to take share away from the likes of Playtika and Big Fish. I think some of the smaller companies are trying to do that by copying what the larger developers are doing in their top-performing titles. What we are doing is trying to create something new and different for the market to acquire a new audience and to entertain old players who are getting used to simple slots games.

**EGR NA: Do the majority of your revenues come from Facebook or mobile? Will that change in the coming months?**

**AK:** The majority of our revenues come from mobile with a 60/40 split over iOS/Android, and I think that mobile revenue will only grow in the future, especially on the latter. The web is dying as a gaming platform, and mobile is growing, and it's easier to acquire new users on mobile.

**EGR NA: Is it more expensive to acquire customers on mobile?**

**AK:** No, it's not. We see healthy CPIs on mobile: \$7-\$10 on iOS and \$4-\$5 on Android. On the other hand, CPIs on Canvas are \$10+. In my opinion, mobile customers are easier to acquire for a couple of reasons: Facebook puts a lot of its efforts into mobile advertising technologies, there is more than one mobile device per person in North America and a lot of new devices are activating every day.

**EGR NA: Can you outline your approach to marketing? Which channels/methods are proving most effective?**

**AK:** We are return-on-investment focused in our marketing activity, and we really care about the performance of the sources. Right now we are seeing good results with video ads (Adcolony/Vungle) but the main part of our budget is set aside for spending on Facebook. No other platform apart from Facebook has such broad targeting options and volumes, which allows us to adjust efficiently and optimize our marketing campaigns to maximize ROI. The only alternative

to Facebook would be Google Search Ads, if and when they open their platform for social casino developers.

**EGR NA: What about TV ads?**

**AK:** We haven't used TV ads yet. We are considering TV ads as a luxury source of acquiring new users, but it's hard to define install source. As a result it's impossible to calculate ROI. Right now we are using sources where we can track install. When Murka is in one of the top three grossing charts in our vertical, we will be using TV ads for sure.

**EGR NA: As a smaller developer is it easier to be more experimental and innovative than the larger firms? What product innovations are in the pipeline?**

**AK:** We are experimenting a lot and it's not because we are smaller, but because we see this as the only way to prove some of our ideas in the game economy, math and UX. But when you become bigger it's hard to stay flexible, and there is less room for innovation. We are a private company, and we can change our strategy pretty fast, and we are happy with this.

We will have a new poker game coming this year, which we believe will be pretty innovative for the market, and we also have two new slots games in the pipeline that will go live before the end of the year.

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Scatter Slots, Murka's flagship title



**EGR NA: Can you provide more details on your new poker product? How will it set you apart from your rivals?**

**AK:** It will be a whole new product for the market and there will be a lot of innovation so I can only share a few things. Actions will take place in a fantasy world. There will be a quest system like Scatter Slots has so players will have to complete them to move forward in the game. Also, as you progress into the game world, there will be non-player characters who you need to beat in heads-up poker. As well we are putting a lot of effort into the customization of a player's environment, so every player will be able to customize how his or her character reacts to in-game events.

**EGR NA: How are you approaching future tech such as wearables, virtual reality and smart TVs? Will smart TVs eventually replace desktops and tablets?**

**AK:** We haven't invested much time and resources into these technologies. We will run some experiments in VR soon and will also develop a version of Scatter Slots for Apple TV. I think that smart TVs and desktops are different platforms with a different audience, and I don't think they will replace each other in the future.

VR is a technology for games, and when you are wearing a VR headset you are entirely dedicated to the game; slots is all about dedication and being in the zone, so it fits well. Some of the analysts are saying that VR is the next big thing in gambling, but it's just an experiment for us at this stage.

**EGR NA: What wider trends do you see emerging in social casino in the coming months, and how will Murka capitalize on them?**

**AK:** Retro or stepper slots are a trend for sure, and one of our upcoming slots games will use this mechanic. Also, it seems that users react really well to innovative gameplay, like we have found with Scatter Slots, and they are becoming bored with what is currently available in the market and want something brand new. ■