

Pinball wizard puts Facebook users on Yellow Brick Road

SAN FRANCISCO, USA: Pinball and slot machine wizard Joe Kaminkow is working his magic on the social games scene pioneered by Zynga and taking Facebook users along the yellow-brick road as his opening move.

Kaminkow and his small team at startup Spooky Cool Labs got a blessing from Warner Brothers Interactive Entertainment to make a *Wizard of Oz* game for play on Facebook. The game will use original clips from the classic film.

"We're proud to have created such an immersive experience based on the greatest, most-watched movie history," Kaminkow said.

"Players get to enjoy interacting with Dorothy, Glinda The Good Witch, Tin Man, Scarecrow, Cowardly Lion and all of the other characters people have loved for years."

Players land in a 3-D world, in the role of the Dorothy character made famous by Judy Garland, to find their virtual farmhouse has crash-landed atop a wicked witch in Munchkinland.

The thrust of the game is to build a thriving Munchkin town with happy little residents and then pave a yellow brick road that leads to Dorothy's tin and lion cohorts and the Emerald City of Oz.

"You aren't just building a city; there is an adventure to go on down the road," said Spooky Cool Labs chief creative officer Brian Eddy.

"We expect people to be playing this for months and months to get to the Tin Man, then the Lion," he continued. "This game could easily go on for years."

Game industry veterans at the Chicago-based startup wove in winning elements of console play such as side missions and being able to navigate the virtual world from any angle including a first-person perspective called "munchkin-cam."

Tower defence game features were added for help repelling attacks by the Wicked Witch of the West and her flying monkeys.

"We have great respect for companies like Zynga that pioneered the space but we wanted to reset the genre and make something more compelling, based on better technology," Kaminkow said with reference titles such as *FarmVille*.

The number of players has climbed quickly since *The Wizard of Oz* game opened to the public in test mode at the start of November. It had been downloaded more than 100,000 times at Facebook as of last week.

Kaminkow's legacy stretches back decades to the glory days of pinball arcades with a long list of creations that included machines themed after blockbuster films *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park*.

He was inducted into the Pinball Hall of Fame in 2004.

During a long stint at casino game maker IGT, Kaminkow unleashed a flood of popular slot machines including *Ghostbusters* and *Sex And The City*.

He holds more than 150 patents and has been ranked among the most important people in the history of slot machines.

"If you've ever gone to Las Vegas and used a slot machine, there is a high probability you've played a game I invented," Kaminkow told *AFP*.

He has produced Broadway plays and reality television shows, and has a stake in a minor league baseball team.

"I am so not the norm in the social games industry," Kaminkow quipped.

"I don't come to work on a skateboard," he continued. "I feel like I am in a Tom Hanks movie where there are these old guys who get together and say 'Let's show these young kids how to do it.'"

Hearst Corporation early this month announced a minority equity investment in Spooky Cool Lab but financial terms of the arrangement were not revealed.

The infusion of funds was billed as backing for the startup's mission to create social games based on top entertainment brands for play in online communities and on mobile devices.

The launch of *The Wizard of Oz* online at apps.facebook.com/wozgame was timed to coincide with the celebration of the film's 75th anniversary.

The game industry reputations of Kaminkow and his Spooky Cool partner Larry DeMar were cited as the reasons Warner trusted them to make a game based on the film.

"Joe and Larry are two of the best casino and pinball game developers in the world," Hearst Entertainment and Syndication president Scott Sassa said when the investment was announced.

"We plan on pairing our intellectual property and access to third-party intellectual property with the game development expertise of Spooky Cool to build a big presence in this space."

The Oz game is free to play, with Spooky Cool Labs making money from optional in-game transactions such as purchasing decorative buildings, better defenses against the witch or extended sessions.

Source: *AFP* via I-Net Bridge