

Forecast for local holiday shopping 'cautiously optimistic'

BY JOSHUA A. BRADLEY
Special to the Record-Eagle

The holiday shopping season is here. But with a questionable economy, a war in Iraq and a less-than-ideal previous shopping year, local retailers are wondering about one thing: How will this year be?

So far, so good, according to local shop owners. Across the board, the numbers are up slightly from last year, and most retailers say that's a good sign.

"Things have been going really well for us," said Darric Newman of

Folgarilli's Wine Shop in Traverse City. "Our business is up over last year, so that's a good indication that things are moving in the right direction."

He added, "I'm not backing off in terms of what I'm purchasing, so we are definitely planning on a very strong holiday season."

Tom Hannah, owner of By the Bay, in downtown Traverse City and Harbor Springs, also sees a bright holiday shopping season, especially now that the presidential election is over.

"Consumers were really

distracted before the election. The two weeks before our traffic dropped way off. But ever since, things have really picked up," Hannah said. "Now that the election is behind us, we can all focus on the positive things like Thanksgiving and the holidays."

Consumers do seem to be in a buying mood. According to a recent University of Michigan survey, the consumer confidence index, a barometer of consumer spending, has increased slightly due to cheaper gasoline and a better jobs out-

look, among other factors.

Do external factors — like the war in Iraq and the soft economy — affect local shoppers' attitudes toward holiday purchases?

Joan Moore, who was window shopping on Front Street, said that while she thought the local and national economy was in "big trouble," it wouldn't affect her Christmas shopping plans.

Susan Gray, 38, also shopping downtown, said that no matter the state of the economy, "It's Christmas! You always spend more than you

plan."

Caiti Thompson, 19, of Lake Ann, said, "I'm very excited to start shopping, but unfortunately I won't be able to buy as much this year because I have less disposable income than last Christmas."

Retailers, like Hannah, say that these external factors make a difference, "but not a huge one," on the local economy.

"It's not the difference between a good or bad year, but it is the difference between a good and great year," he said. "People will

still shop, but maybe they'll be more reluctant to buy expensive items."

Newman agrees: "No matter what's going on in the world, people are still going to entertain at home. Maybe they won't fly the family to Hawaii, but people are still having the family over for the holidays."

Bob Long, manager of Trains and Things Hobbies, in downtown Traverse City, said: "I think we are all cautiously optimistic."

Joshua A. Bradley is a local freelance writer.

The games people still like to play

BY CHANDRA ORR
Copley News Service

Games are one of the few gifts that are sure to please the entire family.

"Games bring out a whole sea of emotions," said Phil Orbanes, president of Winning Moves Games. "It's not just the game, it's the interaction, the spontaneity that takes place between the players."

Whether stocking up for family game night or just looking to put some fun back in Saturday afternoon, choosing the right game is essential to a good time.

"The selection of the game is first and foremost," Orbanes said. "Make sure the game holds an interest for all involved."

This season, a new crop of challenging games promises unlimited entertainment.

■ Enter the great battle of deduction with "Coda." With a little luck and strategy, players must crack their opponents' codes while protecting their own secret numbers. It sounds simple, but players must work fast because each turn the codes grow more complex. (Ages 8 and up, Winning Moves, \$9.95.)

■ Ready, set, sail. Take an adventure on the high seas with "Dread Pirate." Set in the Galapagos Archipelago, this game of strategy and defense pits captain against

trade and capture the most gold and jewels. But beware of the perils at sea — get attacked by a giant squid and lose a turn. The game comes impressively packaged in a wooden "treasure chest" and has a detailed map. (Ages 8 and up, Front Porch Classics, \$99.95.)

■ "The Game of Life: The Simpson's Edition" combines America's favorite nuclear family with all the elements of the original "Life." Go to college and go in debt to Fat Tony. Get married and buy a house — but be careful. Players may wind up living in the Yokel Shack or Patty and Selma's Crone Condo. Players who save their money retire at Mr. Burns' Manor. Those who spend away end up in the Retirement Castle. (Ages 9 and up, Hasbro, \$19.99.)

■ "Yahtzee" fans will love "Kit & Caboodle," a dice game that all depends on how players classify various images from science and nature. Players roll six dice attempting to earn the highest score, but the images on the dice leave the score open to different possibilities. Roll a turtle and one must decide whether to score it as a reptile or include it in the "things with shells" category. Is the bat a mammal or thing with wings? Families flex their creative muscles while honing up on math skills. (Ages 8

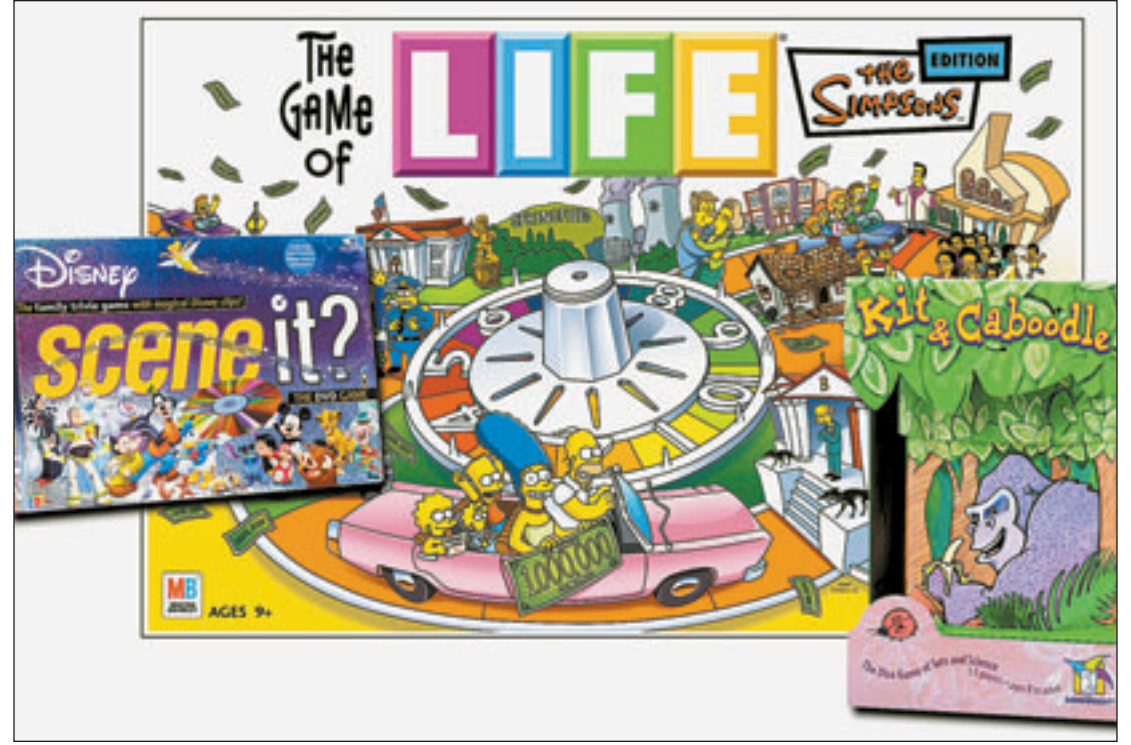
and up, Gamewright, \$11.99.)

■ Using familiar characters, "Shrek 2 Top Trumps" puts a new spin on the classic card game of War.

Whether comparing odor levels or the amount of courage, players use statistics on each card to trump opponents and steal their cards. The player with all the cards at the end wins the game. (Ages 6 and up, Hasbro, \$6.99.)

■ Players get to show their artistic side with "Clay Mania," a sculpting game reminiscent of "Pictionary." With 45 seconds to mold a mound of clay into the object listed on a card, teammates must guess what other players are making to earn a token. The first team to seize five tokens wins. With creativity on the line, "Clay Mania" will turn family game night into an entertaining exercise in ingenuity. (Ages 10 and up, Gamewright, \$17.99.)

■ "Maya Madness" sounds simple: Keeping a running total for all players, use the cards to reach the number on a secret token. Be the first to collect five mystery tokens and win. But with other players attempting to reach the same goal, it's more challenging than it sounds. One part luck, one part strategy, "Maya Madness" sharpens math skills, memory and tactical reasoning ability. (Ages 10



Games offer fun for the whole family. "The Game of Life: The Simpson's Edition" is new this year, the latest "Scene It?" features Disney trivia and clips and "Kit & Caboodle" is sure to challenge the minds of children and adults alike.

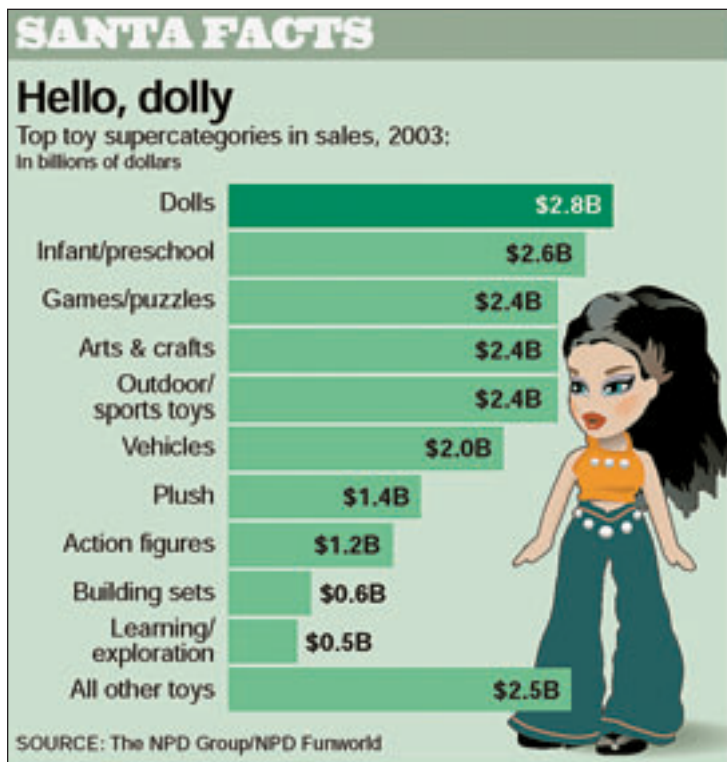
and up, Gamewright, \$12.99.)

■ Forget renting the latest blockbuster. With the "Disney Scene It? DVD Game," players test their knowledge of all things Disney. Featuring actual clips from classics like "Snow White" and "The Little Mermaid," players race toward the winners circle by answering trivia questions and identifying actors, scenes and songs from Disney flicks. Don't worry about growing tired of "Scene It?" The DVD technology randomizes clips for a unique game each time. (Ages 8 and up, Mattel, \$39.99.)

■ Hot on the heels of "Yu-Gi-Oh," "Duel Masters" promises to be the next big thing. Unlike traditional card games, this new trading card game lets players swap creatures and spells to create their own unique decks. A hit in Japan, "Duel Masters" challenges players to knock down their opponents' shields while protecting their own. Get in on the action with the "Duel Masters Shadowclash Collector's Set." Packaged in a reusable storage tin, the set includes everything needed to start playing — two decks of cards, a strategy guide, a deck guide and

collectible foil cards. (Ages 8 and up, Vintage Sports Cards, Inc., \$19.99.)

■ Fancy a day at the track? "Stretch Run" puts lady luck to the test. Players must race their horses for the finish line by rolling the die or playing a card. With a muddy track, this won't be easy. For advanced play, use the track sheets and clubhouse cash for handicapping and wagering. Housed in a rustic wood and leather case, "Stretch Run" won't end up in the storage closet anytime soon. (Ages 8 and up, Front Porch Classics, \$59.95.)



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