

New video titles to grab kids' attention this season

BY DEIRDRE O'SHEA
Copley News Service

Video game profits could be in the hands of children this season.

In the months before Christmas, video game publishers release hundreds of new games for kids and the public snaps them up in record numbers.

According to the NPD Group, a market research concern, U.S. retail sales for the video games industry (that's console and portable video games hardware, software and accessories) increased 21 percent during the first half of 2005 compared to the same time period in 2004. Last year, the industry was worth \$7.3 billion.

This latest jump in sales is thanks in large part to new hand-held platforms.

Portable, or hand-held, game devices are hot — especially with older children and teens who enjoy sharing the game-playing experience.

"Girls like multiplayer games because they can play with friends. It's social, a way to communicate," said Dana Long, director of kids marketing for Buena Vista Games. "And boys like the multiplay because they like to compete."

Portable gaming software sales topped \$1 billion in 2004, another first. Almost all of these sales were for use with Nintendo's Game Boy Advance (GBA) or the Nintendo DS.

The Nintendo DS (for "dual screen") has a second screen with touch-screen technology, wireless communication for real-time multiplayer game playing, and software to draw, write and send messages wirelessly.



CNS Photo courtesy of Buena Vista Games

Buena Vista has video games based on "Lizzie McGuire," as well as other hit Disney Channel TV shows. "Kids like to play with the characters they know," said Dana Long, director of kids marketing for Buena Vista Games, the interactive entertainment arm of the Walt Disney Company. "They feel like they're going into their world and playing with the friends that they have a relationship with."

More recently, Nintendo released the stylish Game Boy Micro, a cell-phone-size version of its Game Boy Advance SP.

Sony's answer is the hand-held PlayStation Portable (PSP). Available since March, the PSP can play films and music, and browse the Web wirelessly. It has built-in stereo speakers and great graphics on a high-resolution screen.

For parents concerned about the violence in video games, knowing what to buy their children is tough. Kids will hear about hugely successful games such as "Grand Theft Auto: San

Andreas" (recently re-rated from M for "Mature" to AO for "Adult-Only" by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board, or ESRB) and ask for them.

But there are plenty of compelling games rated:

- E for "Everyone" (ages 6 and up)
- E10+ for "Everyone 10 and older"
- T for "Teen" (over 13)

And, in fact, excluding monster sellers like "Grand Theft Auto," E-rated and T-rated videos sell much better on average.

Software developers have rushed to support new hand-held platforms. Many of the

best-selling games this holiday season will be spinoffs of movies and TV shows, or sequels to a popular video game.

"Our Disney Channel hand-held games are some of the most successful franchises for 'tweens on the GBA," said Dana Long, director of kids marketing for Buena Vista Games, the interactive entertainment arm of the Walt Disney Company.

Buena Vista has new video games for GBA and Nintendo DS based on the hit Disney Channel TV shows "Kim Possible," "That's So Raven" and "Lizzie McGuire."

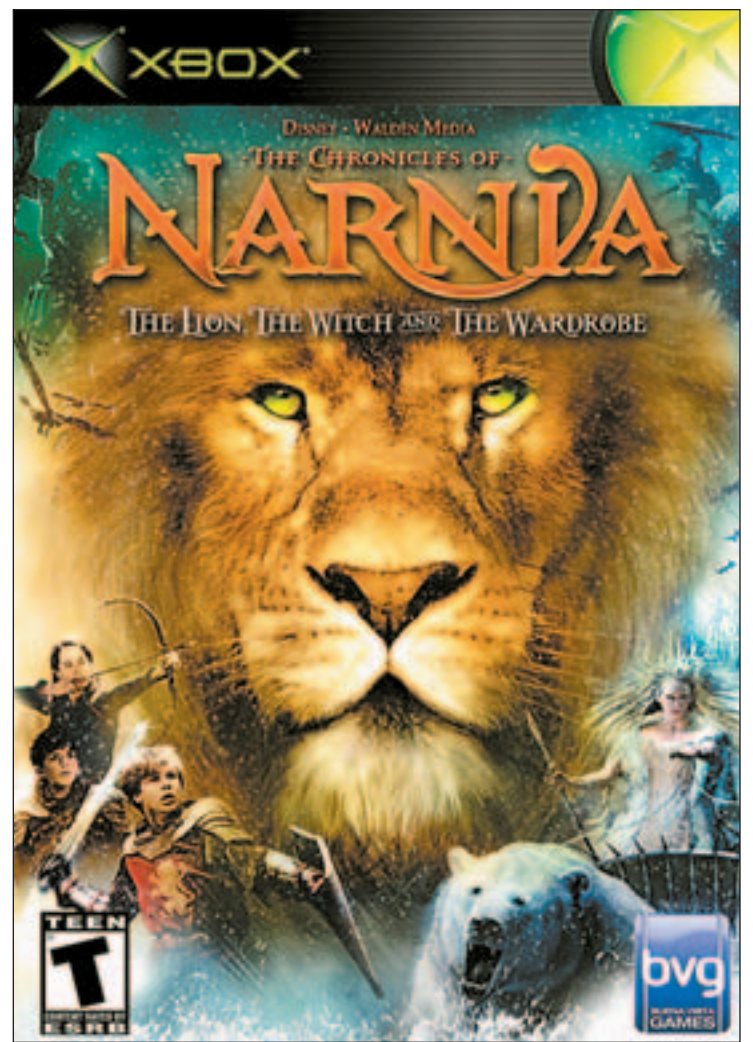
"Kids like to play with the characters they know," Long says. "They feel like they're going into their world and playing with the friends that they have a relationship with."

Other Buena Vista 2005 offerings include games based on the Walt Disney Pictures films "Disney's Chicken Little" and "Herbie: Fully Loaded."

Also available in video games for GBA and DS are "Madagascar" (Activision) and "Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith" (LucasArts). "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" is available for GBA.

Two new E-rated racing games for the PSP combine hot soundtracks and cool graphics and have gotten great reviews: In "Wipeout Pure" (Scea) hovering Anti-Gravity Racers compete for survival in the year 2197. "Ridge Racer" (Namco) has 24 circuits to test your racing prowess.

"Nintendogs," the E-rated video game phenomenon, is the best-selling new game



CNS Photo courtesy of Buena Vista Games

A video game for adolescents is being released in conjunction of the holiday movie, "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe," based on the book by C.S. Lewis.

franchise ever for a portable system. Children can care for lifelike puppies using the DS system's touch screen and microphone.

And there are two new video game titles for GBA and DS that are based on children's books/films: "Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire" (Electronic Arts) and "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" (Buena Vista), from the C.S. Lewis

classic. "Narnia," the movie, is scheduled for theater release Dec. 9.

There will be a wealth of reviews and information available as software companies advertise their 2005 games for the holidays. With each game costing \$40 or \$50 on average, parents want to choose wisely. As with movies, rely on several reviews from experts and let the ratings guide your decisions.

Latest electronics keep us multitasking with style

BY CHANDRA ORR
Copley News Service

It's no wonder personal portable electronics are a multibillion dollar business. Ask anyone what they want most from Santa and you're bound to get more than a few requests for the latest and greatest gadgets.

Last year alone, consumers snatched up \$113 billion in consumer electronics with digital cameras, cell phones and MP3 players leading the way, according to a recent report from the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA), a top trade association for the consumer technology industry. That number is projected to grow by \$10 billion by year's end as holiday shoppers capitalize on lower prices and better features.

They may have started out as novelty items for technophiles and executives on to go, but these little devices have embedded themselves in the American lifestyle. Now, it seems as if everyone from photo-snapping grandparents to text-messaging 'tweens has an arsenal of tech-toys they simply cannot live without. As more

and more consumers flock to join the digital era, manufacturers are dropping prices to compete for their share of the market, according to the CEA. And that means this Christmas is the perfect time to surprise that special someone with an upgrade.

Don't know where to start? Take a look at the latest all-in-one electronics. Multitasking devices like the T-Mobile Sidekick and the soon-to-be released HTC Wizard are the must-haves of the moment, according to Todd Achilles, vice president of North American sales and marketing for HTC, a top international electronics distributor.

"Consumers want mobile devices that do more and are spending more to get them," he said.

In general, phone, e-mail, text messaging and full synching capabilities are the most-in demand applications, Achilles said. And devices that combine all the functions in one unit are leading the market. If the device also incorporates an MP3 player, it's all the better.

"An integrated MP3 play-

er with the phone is a very hot feature this holiday season," he said. Increased memory capabilities are also popular.

"On the smart phones and converged devices launching this holiday season, nearly all provide a slot for a memory card," Achilles said. "With typical cards at 1 GB of memory or more, you can put several hours of songs on the phone."

Such storage capability rivals that of the mid-tier and low-tier stand-alone MP3 players, making phones with memory cards an attractive option, he said. With devices capable of doing everything but picking up the dry cleaning, form has become just as important as function, Achilles said.

"A flip phone with camera isn't enough anymore. They want a QWERTY keyboard. Cluttered devices with lots of keys and a full keyboard exposed on the surface actually scare off consumers," Achilles said. "The best devices from a design and usability standpoint are those that have only a few exposed keys — send, end, menu, etc. —

and then hide the full QWERTY key set underneath."

Convergence devices, or those that combine multiple functions, aren't likely to replace their stand-alone counterparts any time soon, though. For example, camera phones are great on the go, but many consumers — 91 percent, according to the CEA — still rely on their digital cameras for most of their photography.

"Many consumers own several photo-capture devices, but our research shows the digital camera remains consumers' primary picture-taking device and we expect that to continue," said Steve Koenig, senior manager of industry analysis at CEA.

With such a reliance on stand-alone electronics, consumers are no longer waiting for their old camera, phone or MP3 player to die before replacing it. It's all about the upgrade.

"Even with digital cameras now in 49 percent of U.S. homes, consumers are purchasing higher megapixel digital cameras as upgrades to their original digital cameras," said

Sean Wargo, director of industry analysis for CEA.

"We're seeing a similar mentality with wireless communications handsets," he said. "Many consumers are opting for digital camera-phones and smart phone devices as opposed to direct-model replacement purchases."

Whether just jumping on the technology bandwagon or opting for upgrades,

shoppers are snatching up electronics at a record rate. This year alone, Americans will bring home more than 23 million new digital cameras and almost 16 million MP3 players, according to the CEA report.

"This demonstrates how established these products are in the lives of consumers," Wargo said.

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