

WHERE GAMING IS GOING NOW

Video game trends for the younger crowd

by Jason White

AS PARENTS, KEEPING UP WITH ALL THE latest video games and systems can be next to impossible. With all the concerns filling their minds, video games might be the furthest thing from most parents' minds. However, for children, it's probably all they think about.

Video games have become the "playgrounds" of the next generation, whether it's playing online games over the Internet or through wireless connections, kids are making friends through a computer. So making sure the right game is in the child's hand has become even more important.

Finding games for the 5–8 age group and 9–12 set can be a very tough thing. "The target demographic for video games has historically been males 16–28, but has been skewing younger all the time," says Lisa Paulson, director of marketing from Kayak Interactive, a global mobile games publisher.

So what can you expect from video game publishers in the coming year for the 5 to 15 set?

Who's the target

In the coming year, many video game industry professionals feel that gaming will be more targeted toward the 9 to 12-year-old set. The 13 to 15-year-olds are generally playing the "T" rated games already that might be skewed more toward the 16 to 19 set.

According to Jamie Cheng, CEO of Klei Entertainment, Inc., "All parts of the industry are starting to realize the market needs to expand beyond the 16–34 male audience, so I think you'll find that there will be a larger variety of games coming soon, including for the 5–15 market space. Nintendo is a great example of expanding the market place with games such as Nintendogs and Animal Crossing."

"Generally speaking, there seems to be more computer games for the younger 5–8 target, and more video games for the older (9–12 and 13–15) groups," adds Megan Gaiser, CEO and president of Her Interactive. Finding out what is actually out there can be a daunting task.

What's out there

Chances are that if there is a hot cartoon or movie that seems to grab a child's attention, there will be a game based on it. Today, many toys come packaged with interactive CD-ROMs or have websites that offer games. Even Post cereal has Postopia.com.

Lorraine Lue, director of global marketing from The Adventure Company, the adventure game division of Toronto-based DreamCatcher Interactive, says, "Strong licenses are very successful and almost necessary to reach this target audience."

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"In some cases, 'traditional' gaming for kids has evolved to be less traditional, and less stationary, which has long been a common criticism of video games for kids. For example, Konami's Dance Dance Revolution is an active game used with an activity mat, which has kids dancing to replicate the on-screen moves," Gaiser notes.

Konami also offers the Karaoke Revolution series of games. Kids can either buy the deluxe version with the microphone so they can sing along or the regular version and use the control pad to match the notes that are being sung.

There are a lot of mobile phone games out there and coming in on the horizon. With so many younger kids having cellular phones, many companies are creating whole divisions devoted to this evolving market.

Here are some new goods

Kayak Interactive has several brand name products coming out for cell phones, like Whac-A-Mole, Three Stooges – Making Dough, the antics of the Stooges in multiple mini-games, and Mastermind, the classic decoding board game, along with an original title, Monkey On Your Back. Kids play a scientifically modified Monkey that can control people and robots it comes across, by jumping on their back

The Adventure Company (a DreamCatcher, Inc. brand) will be releasing Keepsake in April.

Her Interactive will have two new Nancy Drew PC CD-ROM releases in 2006, Danger by Design, in late July, and The Creature of Kapu Cave, in late October.

Konami will be releasing Street Supremacy, Ys: The Ark of Napishtim, Tao's Adventure: Curse of the Demon Seal, and CMT Presents: Karaoke Revolution Country.

In keeping with getting kids moving more, Codemasters will be releasing Dance Factory for PlayStation 2. Kids can insert CDs from their own

music collection and, using the EyeToy technology, the game will recognize the beats and create choreography that goes along with the rhythms of the music. There are solo dance, dance off and fitness modes in the game.

Klei Entertainment offers several puzzle games, like Eets which may be a bit complex for the 5 to 8 crowd, but 9+ should have a good time with the game. For the 5 to 8, there is Professor Fizzwizzle, another puzzle game.

But just how do you know what to choose? With so many news items on games like Grand Theft Auto and the graphic sex and violence it depicts, many parents might find that buying a game is even more difficult than finding one.

Being more informed

There are hundreds of games released every year and despite the press, most of them are rated "E" or "E 10+" so that generally means they are safe for anyone to be playing. The controversial games that come out tend to be rated "M" and are designed for the 17 and older crowd. All parents need to keep in mind is that "M" is equal to an "R" rating for a movie.

There are many resources for parents, such as the ESRB (Entertainment Software Rating Board) site, www.esrb.org, who assigns the ratings for games. There are also many video game sites that offer fuller reviews of games, like www.GameSpot.com and www.IGN.com.

Parents can also go to the game publishers' websites and download trailers, screenshots, game descriptions, and sometimes play demos. It's really up to parents to decide what is appropriate for their child. No one knows his or her child better than a parent.

