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## COLUMNS: Playing Games

May 18, 2006

### New games play to widening demographic

 By [Paul Hyman](#)

If advertisers love video games mainly because they attract that prized 18-35-year-old male demographic, wait ... there's even more good news. Over the last year or so, the gaming audience has been quietly expanding to include additional consumers -- more females, more baby boomers. And savvy publishers and developers are not only playing to that widening audience, they're making concerted efforts to grow it even further to so-called "market-expansion customers."

Recently, at least three separate studies have testified to video games' ballooning appeal, particularly one that has female gamers outnumbering male gamers in the 25-to-34 age category 2-to-1, regardless of platform. In addition, on PCs, female adults are almost twice as likely to spend more than 20 hours per week gaming compared to men, according to the CEA's "2006 Gaming Technology Study."

This doesn't necessarily mean these female gamers are willing to pay for play. The poll's results reflect women's engagement mainly in online games, many of which are free of charge, according to the study conducted by the Arlington, VA-based Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) together with the popular [GameSpot](#) Web site.

But whether their gameplay is a freebie or not shouldn't matter to advertisers who, after all, are interested in eyeballs and not game purchases, says Steve Koenig, the CEA's senior manager of industry analysis, who developed the study.

"Many of the games they play are the so-called "[casual games](#)" for which there is a very substantial female audience that you can't ignore," he explains. "That has implications for advertisers as well as for software developers. Regardless what sort of business model you are talking about -- direct-revenue, models supported through subscriptions or those that rely on ad revenues -- the bottom line is that there are a large number of Americans who are playing games, who are spending quite a bit of time doing it."

Koenig adds that this translates to increasing business opportunities, especially in the "free-type game sites that are driven by advertising revenues. The fact that these gamers are playing 'Tetris' for free on 'Yahoo Games,' for example, isn't the point," he adds. "The bottom line is that the site is making money in the form of ad revenues from those gamers being on the Web. And so the games business goes beyond the hardcore gamers who are shelling out 50 bucks at GameStop. It also involves the casual gamers -- mainly female -- who are sitting at home and playing Solitaire. The people who make those games, the people who



"Word Heaven"

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advertise to those gamers, should be asking, 'How do we do a better job of marketing to them? And is there a way to convert those gamers into people who would be willing to pay to play?' Because if everyone is tailoring their pitch to just the 18-to-35-year-old male gamers, they're certainly missing out on a large consumer segment."

In addition to Web gaming, women are also being viewed as the next big demographic for mobile gaming.

In his "Understanding The Mobile Games Consumer" report this month, Graham Brown suggests that cell phone games need to evolve from their current focus on young, male core-gamers to middle-aged females, "the very same market that has grown significantly online in recent years." Brown is CEO of the UK-based [Wireless World Forum](#).

"The draw of the mobile youth segment is compelling," he adds, "but revenues are limited and competition for this segment is intense. On the other hand, females -- and, in particular, older consumers -- are a real growth area. In 2006, we will see the number of female games consumers outnumber males for the first time globally."

Kristin McDonnell intends to take advantage of that fact. Last year, she helped launch Menlo Park, CA-based [LimeLife Inc.](#), a publisher of mobile games aimed at women. To-date, LimeLife has [two games](#) on Verizon, Sprint, and Cingular handsets -- "Girl's Night Out Solitaire" and "Word Heaven" -- and plans to come out with another eight or so this year, half of which will be developed internally. While none of them have been announced yet, all will be casual games.

"What we noticed was that while the Web was offering a lot of content that appeals to women, the mobile carriers weren't," says McDonnell. "We know from our research -- as well as being female and in the games industry for over 15 years -- that the games women enjoy most are the casual games, which are mostly card games, word games and puzzle games. And while word games are huge on the Web, less than 4% of the games on the handset decks are word games. Instead, most of what is on the decks has kind of a masculine slant to them."

McDonnell finds that odd, considering that, according to Yankee Group data, 58% of mobile gamers are women and that, according to her own research, games are second only to ringtones for desired mobile downloads among women.

Advertisers are already seeing the possibilities, she says. For example, Proctor & Gamble sponsored LimeLife's "Girl's Night Out Solitaire," linking it in retail and on the Web to P&G's Cover Girl cosmetics brand.

"Advertisers are recognizing that using mobile to advertise is kind of like reaching consumers with a very small TV ad when they are actually in a store and ready to make a purchase decision," McDonnell explains.

Other mobile game developers don't necessarily say they are making games for men, but, notes McDonnell, "when you're building action or sports games, you know that 98% of your audience is going to be male. There are masculine play patterns -- which are action, competition, aggression and destruction -- and there are feminine play patterns -- which are personalization, collaboration, communication, aspiration and puzzle-solving."

She points to LimeLife's "Word Heaven" as an example of a game built from the ground up for women. "The goal is to get to heaven by spelling words from a jumble of six letters," she says. "Women like puzzles but they don't necessarily like time pressure, so the timer can be turned on and off. That theme, the colors we used, the music, it all has a very feminine feel to it. "

McDonnell believes there is "money being left on the table" when

game developers don't recognize that there are large audiences not being well-served.

"That's true in mobile and elsewhere," she says. "It's my understanding that the console manufacturers, too, observe that there is a huge female gamer audience and they are trying to offer more in terms of casual games."

Indeed, the strategy of Nintendo -- which will unveil its next-generation Wii console later this year and faces strong competition from heavy-hitters Microsoft and Sony -- is to reach out to both female and older gamers to expand its customer base.

"We've observed a broadening of the video game audience and we are helping to drive that further with our handheld products and, especially, our soon-to-be-released Wii console," notes Reggie Fils-Aime, executive vp of sales and marketing at Nintendo of America. "This is a tremendous opportunity to expand the gaming demographic, not just by attracting the core gamers, but also women, older consumers, baby boomers, people who never thought of picking up a controller because, in the past, they perceived console games as too complicated to pick up and play."

Minneapolis-based investment banking firm Piper Jaffray recently released its "Spring 2006 Teen Survey: Video Games" report, which seems to underscore the fact that, strategically, this is a good time to try and turn non-gamers into gamers.

"The interest in video games among teens continues to decline," says the report. "Almost 80% of teens surveyed indicated they intend to spend less time playing video games in 2006 and nearly 70% indicated that their interest in playing video games is decreasing. This represents the most dramatic response in two years."

At the recent E3 video games industry show in Los Angeles, Nintendo unveiled its "Touch Generations" program, a collection of casual-type games that "go beyond traditional gamers and appeal to multiple generations of users," describes Fils-Aime.

These include last month's release of "Brain Age" and next month's releases of "Brain Age Academy" and "Sudoku Gridmaster," all for the Nintendo DS handheld and all described as "mental training games."

"A third of the 'Brain Age' customers are 35 and over," Fils-Aime notes, "which tells us that, with the right product, we can broaden the video game demographic. It's a game that speaks to an older audience by giving them a mental edge, helping them stay sharp and, frankly, the game is very addictive. Once you start working on it, it's awfully hard to stop."

The marketing campaign echoes the more mature slant of the game. Instead of promoting "Brain Age" on, say, MTV, Nintendo has run ads in "USA Today" and "Time" magazine, "which is the best way to reach the consumers who would be most interested in the product," Fils-Aime observes.

Similarly, in August, Nintendo released "Nintendogs," a "virtual pet" program for the Nintendo DS that "had huge appeal for the female gamer," says Fils-Aime. "That's because of the way you interact with it ... by petting the pixilated puppy, by speaking to it, by the way you form an emotional attachment to it."

Nintendo intends to release a series of "Clubhouse Games," which include card games and other female-oriented titles.

"We believe we are at the forefront of broadening demographics -- for girls, for women, for older consumers who are perhaps forty, fifty, and sixty -- for both handhelds and consoles," Fils-Aime adds. "The goal is market expansion as a way to grow the industry, to grow our share and to have more and more consumers enjoying the gaming experience."

"We're going to see a greater focus on games that are very clearly

themed to women," says McDonnell, "just as action, sports and, to some extent, casino games have been clearly themed to men in the past and present. The industry is recognizing that women are the majority of the audience ... and that trying to make games unisex doesn't always make them as compelling as if they were themed to one gender or the other."

**Paul "The Game Master" Hyman was the editor-in-chief of CMP Media's GamePower. He's covered the games industry for over a dozen years. His columns for The Reporter run exclusively on the Web site.**

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