

Tokyo Game Show's soaring allure

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Long gone are the days when computer games were seen as a bastion for awkward teenagers. From the commuter eagerly playing a game on his cellular phone on the train to tiny tots playing games with characters from their favorite television shows, gaming is serious business.

So it was no surprise that the number of companies taking part in the latest Tokyo Game Show reached record levels, as did the number of visitors who wanted to see firsthand what computer game companies, both large and small, have up their sleeves.

The biggest event by far at the show was the unveiling of the latest game consoles by the world's biggest computer game console manufacturers, Sony Computer Entertainment, which makes PlayStations, and Microsoft, which produces the Xbox.

Amid much anticipation, Microsoft showed off its latest Xbox 360 model, which will be on sale worldwide Dec. 10 to be available for the Christmas shopping season, while Sony allowed its fans to ogle the PlayStation 3, which will be on the market by next spring.

Yet while Sony and Microsoft may be slugging it out to see who comes out on top in the latest computer-game battle, they also need to be keeping an eye out for other players in the field.

A total of 131 companies devoted to the gaming industry, from computer-game hardware manufacturers to game designers, took part in this year's show, with more than 600 games available for die-hard game

fans to play. The organizers reported that a record-breaking 176,000 people came to the biggest annual gaming event in Japan, up from 160,000 the previous year.

For many, the most exciting find at Makuhari, a conference center in the outskirts of Tokyo where the show took place over the weekend offering, came from Nintendo.

The latest version of Nintendo's console makes use of a one-handed controller that can also be swung around like a baseball bat or a sword so that players can actually move around themselves to get the computer game characters to move. Named the Revolution, the product is expected to be available to consumers some time next year.

Nintendo President Satoru Iwata said at a news conference to launch the product that the Revolution was geared to all potential fans, not just gaming fanatics.

"A beginner or an expert alike can enjoy this," he said, pointing out that "people are scared away by the complexity of operating games."

The show also demonstrated that game enthusiasts are eager not only for more simplified consoles, but also to play online. Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo all made a point of promoting their latest software titles that can be used inter-connectedly, allowing players to play against each other, each from the comfort of their own homes. That growing taste for gaming online has encouraged phone carriers including NTT and KDD to unveil their own game products that subscribers can play from their mobile phones at any time.

But for die-hard fans, one of the biggest allures of the annual show is to be able not only to boast that they were among the first to play the latest games, but also to meet with the designers themselves and also to meet

the characters from their screens in person, or at least see someone dressed up in character during the show.

In fact, some people were seen queuing up to get in first as early as five days before the doors opened to the general public, ever eager for those bragging rights.

Meanwhile, the big companies did not forget to cater to their core customers who has stayed loyal to them over the years, namely the young single male. From Sega to Konami, the major names in the industry all made sure that they had so-called companions manning their booths. The teenage female beauties were dressed in corporate uniforms that ranged from looking space-age and downright bizarre to revealing, sexy attire and readily posed with fans for a photo.

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