

Verizon gaming services bust stereotypes

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The classic stereotype of the antisocial video gamer alone in his basement is due for a renovation. Though there are more gamers than ever before, they are managing to find each other, through multi-player online games.

"Think of the benefit of a generation that grows up working together, instead of watching TV in isolation like my generation did," said Jason Henderson, games product manager for Verizon Communications.

As part of its Verizon Game Network, the company is holding weekly events where teams of 16 meet in a centralized location to compete in multi-player games like Counter-Strike.

"You can go out on a Tuesday night around the country to LAN Centers," he said, "and all these teens aren't at home on the couch, they're not down in the basement like everyone always used to say. They're engaged and competing with friends in these complex team events."

The events are in support of Verizon's subscription-based gaming ventures.

Verizon offers several options. The most pervasive service is the Verizon Game Network, which Henderson said it geared toward serious gamers.

Henderson described these types of players as males between 18 and 34 years old, who "tend to play big, resource-heavy games."

He said that VGN is a client that lives on a user's desktop, and acts as a central point to play games as well as chat.

They also offer Verizon Games On Demand for mainstream gamers. Henderson said that this is for people who play games but don't necessarily identify themselves as gamers.

"Games have become so ubiquitous as a way for people online to entertain themselves" that many users don't consider themselves gamers, he said.

Henderson added that while serious gamers tend to be male, casual gamers "skew heavily female." He said that 75 percent of gamers fall under the category of casual gamers.

A side-product to the On Demand service is On-Demand Family Place, which features family-friendly games. In addition to the three services, Verizon's games page offers regular downloadable games.

Henderson said that the On Demand service attracts not only casual gamers, but also the serious gamers.

"On Demand has a lot of serious gamers who sign up just to have something fun and extra to play," he said.

He compared On Demand gaming to "snacking," where for a flat per-month subscription fee, users can check out many games and decide which ones they like.

VGN service is about \$8 per month. A subscription for On Demand is \$15 per month, and a subscription for On Demand Family Place is \$8 per month. Downloadable games are offered for free.

A recent report by market analysts Light Reading Insider says that while the online gaming industry is poised to continue expanding in coming years, broadband access providers will not be able to profit much from it.

"Online gaming is big business, just not for the carriers," said James Crawshaw, contributing analyst for Light Reading Insider, in a news release.

Crawshaw said that even if Verizon sold the VGN service to a quarter of its 4.5 million broadband subscribers at \$8 per month, it would generate about \$100 million in additional annual revenue.

That's approximately 0.3 percent of Verizon's fixed-line revenue, he added.

Henderson said he thought the online gaming industry was still evolving.

"We will find the revenue moving into new product models," he said. "We're still at the beginning of this."

He added that he does not think online gaming is likely to plateau in popularity in the next few years.

Microsoft's Xbox Live, a console gaming system that can connect online, was unveiled in the marketplace this past winter. Henderson said he doesn't think it had any negative affect on the online gaming business.

"I honestly don't believe Xbox Live is stealing users from online," he said.

He said that the Xbox Live has an advantage of being a consistent experience and more accessible for neophyte users.

"That's the beauty of the console, and that's why the console has such heavy penetration," he said.

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