

As phones get smarter, game makers ring the changes

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A Japanese woman plays a game on the Apple's iPod in Tokyo. Tetsuya Ide, a teenage computer boffin is betting that Apple's hit gadget is the key to having a new generation of video game players in the palm of his hand.

Tetsuya Ide doesn't own an iPhone, but the teenage computer boffin is betting that Apple's hit gadget is the key to having a new generation of video game players in the palm of his hand.

He's not the only one. Video game console titans Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft are facing growing competition from the increasing popularity of games played on [mobile telephones](#) or Internet-enabled gizmos.

"A game's creativity used to depend on the hardware," said Ide, a 19-year-old computer programming student who is developing an iPhone game as part of his studies.

"A successful game now is one that's simple and reaches a wide network of people," he told AFP at last weekend's Tokyo Game Show.

Major industry players have also begun to recognise the potential of smartphones as a springboard to reach casual gamers, due to the runaway popularity of the iPhone and iPod Touch, both of which debuted two years ago.

Of the 758 software titles on display at this year's Tokyo Game Show, 168 were designed for mobile telephones -- twice as many as last year.

"Cellphones are a very promising platform," said Kazumi Kitaue, chief executive of Konami Digital Entertainment, publisher of video games including the Metal Gear and Silent Hill series.

"The appeal is that everyone owns one. A family with three children may have one [PlayStation 3](#), but three cellphones with which they can download and play games," he said.

Making games for mobile phones also enables developers to reduce costs in the face of the worst global [economic downturn](#) in decades.

"They won't have to spend a great deal of money and effort developing new software," said Hirokazu Hamamura, president of Enterbrain Inc., a [video game](#) magazine publisher.

"They'll be able to capture a client base through the iTunes store," he added, referring to Apple's portal for downloading music and games.

With their high-resolution images, role-playing games for the PlayStation 3 or [Xbox 360](#) consoles often demand budgets comparable to those of Hollywood blockbusters, amounting to hundreds of millions of dollars.

In contrast, a cellphone game can cost just a few thousand dollars to develop.

Media Magic, a company that develops games for Japanese cellphones, is among those firms that seek a bright future for games for the iPhone.

"We saw the iPhone as a threat in the beginning. But since the same device is used all over the world there is greater opportunity for a bigger market," said Mitsuru Oshibo, a content developer with the firm.

About 80 percent of game developers in Japan have dabbled in creating games for the iPhone, according to an analysis of 100 companies by CRI Middleware Co., which creates software components for video games.

But bigger game developers are feeling the pressure as smartphones threaten to sap the industry's traditional source of revenue from sales of games for consoles such as the PS3, the Xbox 360 or Nintendo's Wii.

Apple boasts hundreds of thousands of applications in its App Store, some of which are priced at less than one dollar.

Analysts say the company attracts at least 80,000 downloads each day, but with prices so low, some developers are wary about jumping on the bandwagon.

"When we look at that business model, we ask ourselves, 'when can we really make the shift'?" asked Shin Unozawa, head of Namco Bandai, the Japanese company behind such games as Pac-Man and Tekken.

"It's quite frightening to think of changing to a different model," he said.

Even so, Bandai Namco said it is stepping up game development for Apple gadgets, showing at the Tokyo Game Show its "Ace Combat Xi" arcade-style action game formatted specifically for the iPhone and iPod Touch.

Rival Square Enix is doing the same, with a handful of titles in the works to be unleashed ahead of the crucial year-end holiday season.

Competition among hardware makers is also hotting up. Apple this month introduced a revamped version of the iPod Touch, with founder Steve Jobs calling it a "great game machine."

That came after Sony released in June a PlayStation Portable Go handheld game, movie and music gadget, seeking to challenge the success of Nintendo's DS handheld machine.

There is even speculation that Sony is working on a PSP phone, although the company has remained tight-lipped.

However, despite the buzz surrounding the iPhone, some experts doubt that the gadget can lure away hardcore gamers.

"Users do have an amazing variety of choice" with the iPhone, said KBC Securities analyst Hiroshi Kamide.

"But it's probably a quality versus quantity argument whereby a lot of the applications on iPhone and iTouch aren't very good," he added.

Kenji Miura, a 23-year-old who describes himself as an avid console enthusiast, was unconvinced by a role-playing game he tried out on an [iPhone](#).

"It's difficult to handle and the images are hard to see," he said at the [game](#) show. "When it comes to playing games, I want to buy a proper console."

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