'Need for Speed' titles lead pack of racing games

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In this video game image released by electronic Arts, a scene from "Need For Speed," is shown. (AP Photo/Electronic Arts)

(AP) -- The video game racing genre is gearing up for a traffic jam.

Nearly a dozen racing games are expected to drive onto store shelves before the end of the year, competing for the attention of gamers at a time when sales have tapped the brakes. "Forza MotorSport 3," "Dirt 2," "Blur," "MotorStorm: Arctic Edge" and "Gran Turismo" for the PlayStation Portable are among the titles plotting a course for release this year.

Electronic Arts has revved up new "Need for Speed" titles as part of its strategy to diversify the 15-year-old racing franchise for different platforms. EA Black Box, the Canadian developer that created the previous "Need for Speed" games, has taken a backseat while other

developers have crafted three games aimed at three different audiences.

The first, developer Slightly Mad Studios' hardcore racing simulator "Need for Speed Shift," was released this week for the Xbox 360, [PlayStation 3](link), [PlayStation Portable](link), PC, iPhone and iPod Touch. "Shift" abandons the series' slick street style in favor of photorealistic action similar to the "Forza MotorSport" franchise. The focus is on recreating the sensation of being pulled by G-forces during high-speed cornering inside the game's 72 realer-than-real racing cars.

"It's something we euphemistically refer to as first-person driving," said "Shift" producer Jesse Abney. "First-person shooter games have done a great job over the last few years of creating an environment where players are really immersed in the action. What we've done with `Need for Speed Shift' is create that true driver's experience of being in the cockpit."

EA will venture down a different path with "Need for Speed Nitro," the arcade-style racing [game](link) developed by EA Montreal for the [Wii](link) and Nintendo DS set for release Nov. 17. Unlike "Shift," this "Need for Speed" edition will feature speedy police pursuits and the ability for racers to trick out their rides and tracks with customizable decals and colors.

"When I first came to EA, I thought it was a really interesting challenge to make a `Need for Speed' game on the Wii that can attract gamers and a general mass audience because the Wii is not a platform that's about graphics," said "Nitro" producer Gadi Pollack, who worked on "Prince of Persia" at Ubisoft. "It's about the gameplay and the handling."

The third "Need for Speed" title, "Need for Speed World Online," is a massively multiplayer online game being developed by EA Singapore. The free-to-play action-driving game, which will be released in Asia

before coming to the U.S., will feature fully customizable cars and a matchmaking system that pits players against each other in multiple game modes.

On the Net:

http://www.needforspeed.com/

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