

Playstation shortage may foil Sony game release

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The opening scene for Sony Corp.'s "God of War III" video game shows a musclebound Greek warrior named Kratos vowing "My vengeance is now."

Punishing rivals is what Sony hopes to do with its hugely anticipated, big-budget [video game](#) that launches Tuesday.

To recoup high production costs by expanding the pool of buyers, most video games are made to be played on multiple systems. But the Japanese electronics giant produced "God of War III" solely for its [Playstation 3](#) console, hoping it will boost sales for the device, which has lagged in third place behind rivals Microsoft Xbox 360 and [Nintendo Wii](#).

"'God of War III' is a cornerstone for the Playstation 3 because it's one of only a handful of big properties that's exclusive," said John Taylor, managing director at Arcadia Investments.

Now that Sony has a highly anticipated video game on its hands, good luck in finding a Playstation 3 to go along with it.

A supply shortage is making the powerful console, which also plays Blu-ray discs, DVDs and music and connects to the Internet, extremely hard to find at retailers, hindering the company's ability to capitalize on the excitement.

Recent visits to [Best Buy](#), GameStop and Target stores in West Hollywood, Calif., found all them sold out; a clerk at Target said they haven't had any in stock for more than two weeks. Wal-Mart online and Amazon.com didn't have any available, either.

"It's not ideal; I won't kid you," said Jack Tretton, president of Sony's U.S. video game division. "But I firmly believe we'll get our hardware back in stock and keep selling 'God of War III' for a long time."

It's critical that Sony ship Playstation 3 units as quickly as possible since video games typically do the majority of their sales within the first month on stores shelves. The previous two "God of War" games sold 8 million copies combined for Playstation 2, and Sony executives are confident that the follow-up, the first in the series available for Playstation 3, will be a multi-million unit seller as well.

Sequels to popular series are important motivators for consumers to buy consoles, which cost several hundred dollars and are major revenue generators for game player manufactures like Sony. The debut of Microsoft's XBox 360-exclusive "Halo 3" in 2007, for instance, triggered record monthly sales for the console outside of a holiday period.

The new "God of War" video game is the culmination of more than three years of development at Sony's Santa Monica, Calif., studio, where a team that swelled to 132 people began work on the project even before the release of "God of War II."

Designed to be the concluding chapter in a trilogy, "God of War III" wraps up the tale of a mortal son of the Greek God Zeus named Kratos -- an invention of the developers; there is no "Kratos" in Greek mythology -- out to avenge the death of his family. Like its two predecessors, the game features plenty of bloody action and epic battles

that have proven popular with hard-core players.

"Sometimes, we think of Kratos as the icon for the PS3," said John Hight, the director of Sony's Santa Monica game studio.

As the No. 1 console in the previous generation of hardware, Playstation 2 enjoyed a number of exclusive releases from publishers including Rockstar Games' best-selling "Grand Theft Auto" series. "God of War" I and II, released in 2005 and 2007 respectively, were among the most popular video games produced by Sony itself at the time.

"We made the first one without much pressure, but 'God of War' is definitely a machine now," said Cory Barlog, who worked on the original and directed "God of War II." "The challenge is to keep coming up with epic moments that one-up what you have done before."

Given the high cost of producing games for the Xbox 360 and Playstation 3 players -- often more than \$20 million -- publishers rarely limit their titles to be compatible with a single console. That has left Sony in a difficult position since, with the exception of Konami's "Metal Gear Solid 4" released two years ago, the company hasn't had any exclusive video games based on established franchises to tie to Playstation 3 since it launched in 2006.

That absence, combined with Playstation 3's high initial price of \$599, led to weak sales for the console over the first two years it was on the market. There are now 33.4 units sold worldwide, compared to 39 million for XBox 360 and 67.5 million for Wii.

In support of "God of War III," Sony has launched an extensive marketing campaign that included a special "Kratos Fury" blackberry-lime flavor Slurpee at 7-11 and a demo placed on the Blu-ray disc of Sony Pictures' "District 9."

Sony had hoped its icon would be ready in time for the holidays, but its release was delayed pushed back to March, missing the most lucrative time of the year for video game sales.

If not for the supply shortage, however, Sony would seem to be in a good position to take advantage of anticipation for "God of War III."

A price cut to \$299 last August, and a new marketing blitz that emphasized the console's multi-media capabilities helped to boost U.S. sales beyond the [Xbox 360](#) in the fourth quarter. It even surpassed Nintendo's [Wii](#) for the first time in September.

And those are encouraging signs, say Sony executives, for when Playstation 3 consoles return to store shelves.

"We ultimately don't make investments on a product-by-product or month-by-month basis, but in our platform," said Tretton. "This game will pay off for us with the people who own a Playstation 3 and the ones who will buy one in the future."

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