

March video game retail sales climb 6 percent

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(AP) -- After a rocky 2009 followed by two months of double-digit declines, U.S. retail sales of video game software, hardware and accessories finally saw an uptick in March.

Market researcher NPD Group said Thursday total video game sales climbed 6 percent from the same month a year earlier, to \$1.52 billion. Strong sales of Nintendo's gaming systems, new "Pokemon" games and Sony Corp.'s "God of War III" helped boost results.

Software sales jumped 10 percent to \$875.3 million, well above what most analysts were expecting. In addition to "God of War," which sold more than a million copies, two "Pokemon" games from Nintendo and "Final Fantasy XIII" from Square Enix were also top sellers. "Battlefield: Bad Company 2" from Electronic Arts Inc. was among the month's strongest-selling games as well.

Industry expectations were for software sales growth of about 3 percent, said Electronic Entertainment Design and Research analyst Jesse Divnich. The higher-than-expected March figures, he added, were driven by Nintendo, whose games sold much better than analysts had predicted.

Hardware sales dropped 4 percent to \$440.5 million, in part because game console prices are lower than they were at this time last year. Nintendo's Wii system sold 557,500 units, and its portable DS, 700,800. Once again, the company easily surpassed rival console makers, with Microsoft Corp.'s Xbox 360 selling 338,400 units and Sony's PlayStation 3 selling 313,900.

Nintendo of America President Reggie Fils-Aime said supply constraints that had squeezed Wii sales in the past couple of months are easing up.

Sales of video game accessories rose 11 percent to \$206.8 million.

Year-to-date video game sales were down 7 percent at the end of March compared with the same three-month period last year.

Earlier Thursday, Activision Blizzard Inc. raised its revenue and earnings forecast for the first quarter, citing strong global demand for its top games - "World of Warcraft" and "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2."

The latter is now the second-best-selling game of all time in the U.S. after Nintendo's "Wii Play," said NPD analyst Anita Frazier. "Wii Play" has sold extremely well in large part because it comes packaged with a Wii controller at no extra cost.

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