

Tokyo game show turns to cell phones, has new star

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Staff members promote at a booth for social networking service GREE at the Tokyo Game Show in Makuhari, Chiba, east of Tokyo Thursday, Sept. 15, 2011. (AP Photo/Koji Sasahara)

(AP) -- A startup little known outside Japan that offers games for cellphones is emerging as the new star at this year's Tokyo video game exhibition, usually dominated by big-name console makers like Sony and Microsoft.

Gree Inc., a [social networking service](#) that began just seven years ago in the founder's living room, had its first booth ever at the sprawling [Tokyo Game Show](#), which previewed to media Thursday ahead of its opening to the public later this week at a hall in this Tokyo suburb.

Its stardom underlines the arrival of so-called "[social games](#)" aimed at

casual users passing the time on smartphones and tablet devices rather than the sophisticated plots, imagery and controls found on gaming devices.

With Gree, mobile games are an additional feature to its social networking service, similar to those already common in the U.S. and other nations with [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#), although those don't focus as much on gaming.

Yoshikazu Tanaka, the 34-year-old founder and chief executive of Gree, said he was serious about expanding business overseas, targeting 1 billion users in the next several years.

Gree already has drawn 140 million users worldwide, and has opened overseas offices, including San Francisco and London.

Gree's booth was among the biggest at the annual Tokyo Game Show.

And it was drawing just as much of a crowd as [Sony Corp.](#), which exhibits every year, and was showing off its new portable machine, PlayStation Vita, set to go on sale Dec. 17 in Japan and early next year in the U.S. and Europe.

In Japan, PS Vita will face off this holiday season against DS3, the portable from Nintendo Co., which features glasses-free 3-D imagery.

Both Nintendo and Sony executives, in presentations earlier this week, expressed worries about keeping growth going in the gaming business, perhaps because of competition from devices like smartphones, Gree's specialty.

The shift to smartphones was affecting [game-software](#) makers as well.

"The network itself is the new platform," said Yoichi Wada, head of Japanese game software maker Square Enix. "Game developers need to keep in mind that gaming is spreading to casual users, including newcomers."

But the advantage of offering gaming on cellphones is simple: Almost everyone in the industrialized world owns a cellphone, and as more nations join that fold, people in those nations are bound to buy cellphones, too.

Tanaka said the advent of social gaming had changed the industry because people were always connected to networks with smartphones and tablets like the iPad, and people aren't necessarily going to go out and invest hundreds of dollars in a special game machine.

Tanaka said he envisioned a time when cell phones would become plentiful in places like Africa and South America for low prices, and people, who would never dream of buying expensive game machines, would be accessing Gree services from cellphones as gaming newcomers.

"What is coming next is very important," he said as a keynote speaker, a good indicator of his spot in the limelight. "Gree is targeting all cellphone-users."

Takashi Sensui, general manager at Microsoft Japan Co., said Microsoft sees social gaming as an opportunity to grow, as it is strong in games for cellphones and computers, as well as with those for its Xbox 360 home console.

What computer device people may want to use merely depends on where they are, such as whether they are on the move or they are at home, he said.

"You can use Microsoft's platform anywhere, anytime and everywhere, on any type of device to enjoy entertainment," he said.

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