

Free play meets console action in PlayStation Home

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Sony Computer Entertainment America rolled out "Cutthroats: Battle for Black Powder Cove," which lets as many as 24 people at a time serve as gunners or captains of rival pirate ships out to sink one another in timed sessions.

In coming months, Home will add post-apocalyptic shooter game "No Man's Land" and role-playing adventure title "Mercia" to its line-up.

"We truly think they are going to revolutionize freemium games on consoles," PS Home senior business manager Chris Mahoney said while giving AFP an advance look at the titles in San Francisco.

Console play has been typically defined by blockbuster titles that take years to develop and hit the market priced about \$60 each.

The videogame industry has been shaken up in recent years by the exploding popularity of online games that are free to play, with creators making money through ads or sales of virtual items such as clothing, armor or weapons.

"When we look at gaming, we see hard-core experiences on one side of the spectrum and a more casual side with free-to-play type games," Mahoney said.

"We think that there is an area in between where you can blend together the best of both worlds."

In November, Sony opened the doors of a remodeled PS Home that put a focus on building rich console quality play to an online social gaming platform.

The ranks of Home users has climbed to 27 million people worldwide since the redesign, which introduced a "hub" that integrates games, quests, community events, user-generated content, shopping and more.

Home users can "transport" their animated characters to game districts with themes such as action, sports and adventure.

Home is at the heart of Sony's PlayStation Network that lets owners of PS3 consoles access games, films, and other entertainment.

Home has more than 230 titles available and has been incorporating successful social game models.

"I love to make games that can appeal to hardcore gamers but can also appeal to people who don't consider themselves gamers; and that is pretty much half of social games," Home director Jack Buser told AFP in a recent interview.

"I want everyone to play games all the time; it is just a better world."

San Francisco-based startup Zynga rose to stardom, and in December went public with a billion-dollar initial stock offering, on the popularity of casual games such as CityVille and FarmVille played online by friends at Facebook.

Google+ social network was enhanced with a virtual play space in a nod to how much people love to play games with one another on the Internet. Zynga recently launched its own website as an online social games platform.

"Google Play and Zynga.com are really cool things giving more access for people to play games," Buser said.

"What Facebook really did was make the world aware that there are hundreds of millions of gamers out there who weren't buying 60-dollar console games but love to play if given the chance."

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