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Game Makers Court ‘Casual’ Players With Shorter, Less Lethal Fare

By [DOREEN CARVAJAL](#), International Herald Tribune

PARIS, Sept. 10 — The mythic keyboard warrior is usually portrayed as a gangly teenage boy hypnotized in the moonlight before a computer screen flickering with assorted elves, dwarves and the forsaken undead.

But hard-core gamers are now facing interlopers in their traditional computer realm. Increasingly, the gaming industry is pursuing casual or coffee-break gamers who indulge in short-term play, and not necessarily of the action-packed genre.

[Vivendi](#), the French media company that owns the popular online multiplayer game World of Warcraft, gave a few hints last week about its game development plans during an earnings conference in Paris. The company’s results from its game unit illustrate why there is keen interest: first-half revenue rose 24 percent from a year earlier, to 296 million euros (\$375.3 million), mostly from World of Warcraft.

“We are developing sophisticated games that can be played for brief periods of time,” said Jean-Bernard Lévy, chief executive of Vivendi, which owns Vivendi Games. “This I can assure to those of you who are concerned about consumers who play a long time.”

For 2007, that means the scheduled introduction of decidedly nonlethal-sounding computer games like Tic Tac Toe and Larry’s Adventures: Love Boat, as well as Red Baron, Incredible Machine and Battlestar Galactica.

Casual video games are generally easy to master and demand less time to complete than multiplayer online games. That is in contrast to World of Warcraft, which has no definitive end, which can make it difficult for obsessive players to leave the world of Azeroth, the Earth-like planet that is central to the game.

Popular casual games include puzzles, solitaire and mah-jongg. Electronic Arts, the largest game developer, offers casual games online in North America at [Pogo.com](#). It also is developing a beta version of Pogo.com in China that it plans to bring to Europe. The site has attracted

more than one million subscribers online, mainly women over 35 years old, a spokeswoman for Electronic Arts, Tiffany Steckler, said.

A market research company, Park Associates, issued a report recently that contended that the video game industry was overlooking a vast middle market that included “leisure gamers,” who were defined as spending 58 hours on average each month playing casual titles, and “dormant gamers,” who love playing video games but were distracted from doing so by family, work or school.

The market is dominated by both men and women between the ages of 35 and 65, with a slight skew toward women, according to the International Game Developers Association.

The potential of casual game players has attracted new entrants. [John C. Malone](#), the chairman of [Liberty Media](#), started dabbling in the field late last year with the \$195 million purchase of 51 percent of a casual game maker, Fun Technologies.

Since then, Fun Technologies, based in Toronto, has made some acquisitions of its own, like its August purchase of Teagames, a British casual games developer that creates online games like Pitch 'n' Putt Golf and Alpine Freestyle.

Two leading German media companies, Georg von Holtzbrinck and Hubert Burda, are also stakeholders in GameDuell, which allows registered users to play against each other in mah-jongg and backgammon tournaments for money and prizes.

In August, the company laid out artificial turf and canvas deck chairs at its stand at a games convention in eastern Germany to attract the middle-aged players who make up more than a third of the registered users of GameDuell.

To develop the casual player genre online, companies must begin inventing a range of games, said René Pénisson, chairman of Vivendi Games, whose second-biggest seller in the first half, after World of Warcraft, was a casual game offering, Ice Age 2.

The new offerings, Mr. Pénisson said, must deliver one overriding quality: brevity. “These are games capable of being played online or on a mobile phone on a train for 15 minutes, a half-hour or an hour,” he said.

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