

Game consoles remain despite smartphones

TOKYO, JAPAN: Games on tablets and smartphones are better, faster and more varied than ever, but the excitement surrounding the upcoming PlayStation 4 -- expected to attract big crowds at this week's Tokyo Game Show -- proves consoles are here to stay, say observers.



PlayStation 4 (Image: Uncrate.com)

They point to Tuesday's (17 September) global roll-out of Grand Theft Auto V, the latest in a multi-billion dollar mega-franchise that dwarfs some Hollywood films, as evidence of the sector's vitality.

Although the market has come off its peak, a hard core of gamers will continue to demand their favourite titles on high-performance machines, analysts say.

Combined retail sales of game consoles - static or portable - and the software for them topped ¥700bn in Japan in 2007, the year after the release of Nintendo's Wii and Sony's PlayStation 3.

But in 2012, the domestic market had shrunk to an estimated ¥485bn, according to the Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association.

The shortfall is a sharp contrast to the fast-expanding market for social games - those that involve some form of remote communication with others and are usually played in Japan on smartphones and other mobile devices - which now accounts for more than ¥400bn a year.

Consoles have loyal following

Hisakazu Hirabayashi, a long-time games industry analyst who heads Tokyo-based consultancy firm InteractKK, said the casual observer might conclude consoles were on their way out.

"It is a market that is not growing but is stable," Hirabayashi told AFP, adding software sales bottomed in 2009 at ¥300bn a

year and have stayed around that mark since.

He says consoles can be thought of as a specific entertainment in their own right for a certain sector of society that will never be "won-over" to a different format at the expense of the device they love.

"They've got their own styles and solid fan-bases. It's a certain cultural mode that attracts people," he said. Hirabayashi says games machines have taken root in people's lives and established traditions that can be seen alongside worlds such as sumo and kabuki.

He says millions of people are willing to buy a new instalment in a mega-hit series such as Final Fantasy and Dragon Quest in the same way that kabuki fans will go to the theatre to see their favourite performers in a new version of an old play.

"Games evolved on a series of technological innovations but game content has become a traditional, conservative industry," he said.

"Sony is addressing its core audience with the upcoming PlayStation 4 but there is not expected to be a leap in sales. But it also won't flop," he said.

Big titles, big excitement

Grand Theft Auto V, the latest addition to the multi-billion dollar franchise was made its worldwide debut on Tuesday (17 September) with midnight launch parties featuring DJs and free burritos were held in Australia, where 320 stores were carrying the title.

If its predecessor is anything to go by, the rumoured US\$270m price tag for development will be a sound investment for the company that owns the title -- Grand Theft Auto IV raked in US\$500m in the week after its release in 2008.

In Tokyo, the weekend launch of Monster Hunter 4, saw a crush of 500 people queuing up for its 7am launch on the Nintendo 3DS platform.

Until the weekend the Monster Hunter series by Capcom, first released in 2004 for Sony's PlayStation 2, had sold 23m copies worldwide. The firm said on Tuesday (17 September) it had already shipped two million copies of the new game.

Takuma Kawakami, 18, who was first in line at the event, said: "There are beautiful graphics and movements that only game consoles can provide. DS has got its own fans and PSP has its own fans," he said, referring to the portable PlayStation device that competes with Nintendo's offering.

Smartphone games

Analyst Hirabayashi said smartphone games were easy to play and matched people's need to kill time when commuting by train or waiting for food in restaurants. The bulk of these games are free to download, but charge players for extra functions or to unlock new sections.

The pricing model has proved attractive to developers because it gets users hooked on a game and then demands their cash. Users also like it because they enjoy the freedom of being able to play a game and decide whether they like it before parting with money.

"If home console games are like kabuki, smartphone games are like casinos where a small number of high rollers support the business. They are two different markets," Hirabayashi said. "No one thinks kabuki is dying off because casinos are becoming popular."

The Tokyo Game Show opens on Thursday (19 September) with more than 300 developers and hardware companies from

around the world flocking to display their latest offerings.

Test play of games on PlayStation 4 will be available, while visitors can expect to get more detailed specifications of the new machine, which will hit the North American market in November and Japan in February.

Other attractions include a romance simulation game area, as well as tournaments on a Tekken beat-em-up and a third-person shooter called World of Tanks.

Source: AFP via I-Net Bridge

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