

Social networking gives lift to game publishers

A boom in social networking and a new delivery platform from Nokia may offer mobile video game publishers a lift after a lackluster year in 2007.

The mobile game market suffered an unexpected slump last year, with many developers and analysts pointing to a lack of interest from telecommunications operators in spending to market games.

Now they are looking at booming interest in new social networking sites, aiming to market the games on those sites themselves.

Digital Chocolate, one of the few global game publishers, has put its hit game Tower Bloxx on several networking and video game sites on the Internet. The game was installed more than 400,000 times in just four months on Facebook.

"The takeup has been better than any of our expectations," said Ilkka Paananen, head of game development at Digital Chocolate. "This year we will support all our key products with similar kinds of marketing."

The media research firm M:Metrics said the number of people who bought mobile games in the United States and Europe last year was almost unchanged from a year earlier, with preloaded games growing in popularity.

"The mobile games segment has been stuck in a rut for a long time now, with less than 5 percent of subscribers actually buying and playing games," said Daniel Winterbottom, an analyst for Informa.

"Operators have spent very little on the marketing and promotion of new game titles," Winterbottom said, adding that around 90 percent of mobile game purchases had been through operator portals.

Informa expects revenue from mobile games to grow 23 percent this year to \$4 billion, helped by Nokia's N-Gage game service which is set to reach the market in the coming weeks.

The N-Gage service would be downloaded on Nokia's multimedia phones, with access to trial versions of many games.

All major cellphone game publishers - including Electronic Arts, Gameloft and Glu Mobile - have signed up for the Nokia platform.

One of the major challenges of mobile game publishers is the vast number of cellphone models - the world's five largest cellphone makers alone bring to market several hundred new models each year.

The need to make different versions of games for a wide array of phones, which all have different software, can represent up to half of game publishers' costs.

Nokia's N-Gage would allow developers to offer a single version of a game to more than 10 million phones.

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