



Next to a wall of Nintendo games—more than 180—sits a real innovation: Homework First, a \$17.99 “video game lock for Nintendo.” Homework First controls “when and how much time your family plays Nintendo,” according to the package. “Great motivator for homework, chores, grounding, etc.”

The games that make Homework First necessary inhabit the most popular section of Toys R Us, where parents hope to find gifts to appease demanding children of the video age. More and more are choosing home video entertainment systems, starting at about \$70.

Traditional toys may be making a comeback, but Nintendo has sold 11 million systems in the United States in the last three years. In Toys R Us, a glittering, lit “World of Nintendo” sign directs the few holdouts to a dazzling aisle of technological wizardry.

For kids addicted or just interested, games and accessories can be easy, appreciated gifts, from literature to elaborate joysticks to bed-sheets decorated with Nintendo mascot Mario.

Mario is everywhere. An array of Game Watches (\$19.99), School Kits (\$1.99), stuffed playmates (\$13.99), lunchboxes (\$6.59), baseball caps (\$4.99), children’s dinnerware sets (\$8.99), Trophy Figures (\$1.96), and gift wrap (\$2.49)—all emblazoned with the short, mustached man who is the mute hero of Super Mario Brothers video game—greet shoppers.

Magazines for players include the million-circulation Nintendo Power as well as Game Player’s Buyer’s Guide and Game Player’s Strategy Guide. A series of instructional videos shows “How to Score More Points on Nintendo Games.”

After-market accessories intended to enhance the games’ entertainment value fill shelves: Supersonic Joysticks, Mattel Power Gloves, Zapper guns, Freedom Stick Infrared Remote Controls, Rock & Roller Controllers, Light Phasers, and Cordless Video Shooters, ranging in price from \$20 to \$80.

All these, of course, only supplement the games themselves, magical cartridges containing unknown worlds, mystical creatures and Tommy Lasorda.

Parents shuffle back and forth along the aisle of games, slips of paper bearing requested titles in hand. They look pained; perhaps it’s the Toys R Us theme repeated

Teenage Mutant Nintendo

Or, How I Got My First Taste Of Game Power

by Matthew Budman

every several minutes over the store PA system: “More games! More toys! Oh boy!”

The variety of games available is overwhelming. Though some (Pac-Man, Donkey Kong) have been familiar to arcade junkies for years, most are new. Advertising alone can’t spread the word about 180 different Nintendo games—not to mention the dozens of Sega and Atari titles—so kids rent games from video stores and trade with one another.

“Parents get lists from the kids and come in here,” says Jacky Rogers of Toys R Us.

Prices range from \$22 for a version of the simple board game Othello (not selling at all) to \$60 for “Nobunaga’s Ambition” (sold out), which takes the player to a civil war in 16th-century Japan.

Games based on movies are popular, though no pattern seems apparent as to which type of film best translates to video. Comedies (*Ghostbusters*, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*), horror flicks (*Friday the 13th*), dramas (*The Karate Kid*, *Platoon*) and adventure films (*Rambo III*, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*) have all captured players’ imaginations.

In lieu of on-the-playground athletic competition, apparently outdated, sports games allow

kids to play everything from ice hockey and soccer to volleyball and golf—all without leaving the living room.

Television shows have inspired a series of games, from game shows (*Wheel of Fortune*, *Jeopardy!*) to sitcoms (*ALF*, *Wrestlemania*). Often quieter and less violent than the adventure and war games, these are popular with older video fans.

Negotiating the aisle smoothly, Marion Taylor of Willows is shopping for a 7-year-old grandson who has requested “Skate or Die” (\$36.99). “I honestly don’t think that he plays Nintendo that much,” she says, “but the only thing he seems to want this year is a new cartridge.”

The grandson is into more modern, advanced games, Taylor says. “He didn’t want baseball or anything like that.” She looks at the wall of computer-generated xenophobia, hysteria and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. “I’m not very familiar with the Nintendo games,” she says. “I really don’t like most of these; they’re kind of gross.”

Unlike most adults here, Taylor has actually experienced Nintendo power. “I played the baseball game once, and my grandson was beating

The “World of Nintendo” aisle in Toys R Us presents a problem for shopping parents—which of 180 video games will make the kids happy?

the heck out of me because I didn’t know what I was doing,” she says ruefully. “Then it got boring because he was beating me.”

The newest forays into the market—and probably the waves of the near future—are Sega’s Genesis system, a 16-bit, \$190 console capable of handling more elaborate graphics, and Nintendo’s Game Boy, a \$90 hand-held game with interchangeable \$20 cartridges and a 1-1/2-inch-square LCD screen.

Across the parking lot, Target has a hands-on Game Boy display, with two games available for testing. Silently warning the computer that I was once a Pac-Man addict, I take on “Baseball” first.

The game pits player against computer, alternating between pitching and batting. The controls are simple, and the first inning opens with me on the mound, tall and confident, my pulse racing.

Nine runs later, shaken, I make the third out and get to stand at home plate, waving a stick at the pitcher. After three batters—and three outs—I take to the mound again, worried but determined, and manage to hold the machine scoreless.

This could be a long one, especially since my towering home run in the bottom of the second tells me I’ve finally mastered the game’s subtleties—at least until the computer’s three-run homer ends the game prematurely in the top of the third, the score 12-1.

Humiliated, I move on to Super Mario Land.

I have a little trouble putting Mario through his paces, since there are no instructions posted and I’m not mechanically inclined. After 10 minutes, fiercely restarting botched games, my practice session is over.

The player negotiates Mario over and around a series of hostile smudges, blobs, platforms and pitfalls. On about the 40th game I make it to the second level of competition—a point that any self-respecting sixth-grader should be able to reach in his or her sleep—and let out a small cheer. Smiling, I look around for approval.

I’ve been standing at the counter, holding this electronic box, for about 45 minutes. I’ll never ask “What’s the appeal?” again. □