Gift Guide: Winners for every kind of gamer

LOU KESTEN - Associated Press - Associated Press

Nearly three-quarters of American households own a device that's used specifically for video games, whether it's a console, a handheld device or a dedicated computer, according to Nielsen Co. Add to that all the people who play games on their smart phones or their home or work PCs, and no one's immune.

But games, like gamers, come in all shapes and sizes. The cousin who's addicted to "FarmVille" probably won't be thrilled with "Call of Duty: Black Ops," and vice versa. If you're planning on giving games to your loved ones this year, try to get some idea of how they like to play.

Here are some suggestions for all types of gamers:

— The adventurer: Some gamers just want to live in an alternate world for 100 or so hours. "Mass Effect 2" (Electronic Arts Inc., $19.99, for the Xbox 360, Windows PC) offers that kind of experience, immersing the player in an intergalactic conspiracy involving a lively assortment of human and alien characters. A little closer to home, there's "Red Dead Redemption" (Rockstar Games, $59.99, Xbox 360, PlayStation 3), a stirring Western drama that's stuffed with shootouts, chases and, of course, poker games.

— The warrior: This gamer thrives on online combat with other humans. "Call of Duty: Black Ops" (Activision, $59.99, Xbox, PS3, Windows PC) is the home of the most intense online action right now, thanks to a new wagering system, which lets you gamble with hard-earned game credits. "Halo: Reach" (Microsoft Corp., $59.99, Xbox) adds aliens into the mix, as well as a broader range of multiplayer modes.

— The partier: If your gamer has siblings, roommates or just a lot of neighborhood pals, you want something they can all play together. "Rock Band 3" (MTV Games, $59.99, Xbox, PS3; $49.99, Wii) adds keyboards to the winning "let's start a band" formula. "Pro modes" for guitar, keys and drums get you closer than ever to genuine musical skill. For pure, chaotic fun, "NBA Jam" (EA Sports, $49.99, Xbox, PS3, Wii) delivers high-flying dunks and jaw-dropping alley-oops with a dream team of basketball legends.

— The casual gamer: You know, the ones who say they're just going to play for five minutes and then disappear for an hour? "Bejeweled 3" (Popcap Games, $19.99, PC, Mac), the latest sequel to the gem-matching challenge that defined "casual games" in the last decade, offers eight variations, including a "zen mode" that's supposed to help the player relax. There's also "Puzzle Quest 2" (D3 Publisher/Namco, $19.99, Nintendo DS; $9.99, Xbox, PC), which builds a role-playing adventure around gem-matching action.

— The kids: They already have the Woody action figure and the Buzz Lightyear

pajamas, so you might as well spring for Walt Disney Co.'s "Toy Story 3" game ($49.99, Xbox, PS3, Wii). Along with an adventure that follows the movie's plot, it includes a superb "Toy Box," which lets players build their own frontier towns. Also satisfying is Disney's "Epic Mickey" ($49.99, Wii), a challenging adventure in which the iconic mouse tries to revive a world populated by forgotten cartoon characters.

— The toddler: It's never too early for children to get into video games. I've seen a 2-year-old wailing on "Rock Band" drums. Even the folks at "Sesame Street" have gotten on board. In "Elmo's A-to-Zoo Adventure" and "Cookie's Counting Carnival" (WB Games, $39.99, Wii; $29.99, DS, PC), the beloved characters teach letters and numbers in games that are lively yet leisurely.

— The iPhone/iPad gamer: Chillingo's "Angry Birds" was the biggest phenomenon of 2010. The publisher's follow-up, "Cut the Rope" (99 cents, iPhone; $1.99, iPad), is no less addictive. It's a puzzler in which you have to, well, cut ropes in order to feed candy to a friendly monster. Meanwhile, board-game lovers will relish the iPhone translations of "Catan" (USM, $4.99) and "Carcassonne" (The Coding Monkeys, $4.99).

— The wanderer: Although the iPhone shook up portable gaming in 2010, many travelers still depend on the Nintendo Co.'s DS or Sony Corp.'s PlayStation Portable. The year's most absorbing DS game is Square Enix's "Dragon Quest IX" ($34.99), an epic that will keep even the most grizzled sword-and-sorcery veteran busy for dozens of hours. PSP owners can dive into Konami's "Metal Gear Solid: Peace Walker" ($29.99), which supplements a solid tale of global espionage with more than 100 bonus missions.

— The PC die hard: Some old-school gamers still refuse to buy a console. Fortunately for them, two of 2010's best titles are playable only on PCs. "Civilization V" (2K Games, $49.99) lets the player build a culture from a handful of impoverished settlers to a nation capable of space exploration. After achieving liftoff, your gamer can compete with two other species for galactic dominance in "StarCraft II" (Activision Blizzard Inc., $59.99).

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