Video game makers plan online invasion

So you don't play video games. You don't know Mario from Adam, the phrase "first-person shooter" makes you nervous, and you've never heard of Grand Theft Auto.

Well, get ready to join in. Some very powerful companies are betting that video games -- and the machines that play them -- are about to invade your life.

The Big Three makers of console video game machines -- Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo -- are all launching a new wave of games this fall that can be played over the Internet by people literally half a world apart. What may be the most visible sales push so far starts Friday, when Microsoft unveils a new online service called Xbox Live.

In the same way that the Internet and e-mail made personal computers a necessity in millions of American homes, these three companies are counting on online gaming to draw new players -- perhaps even people who have never given gaming a second thought.

That's a bold goal, but one made by an industry with nothing but success in its background. While the economy slumps, the video game industry -- which reported revenues last year of more than $9 billion -- is taking in enough money annually to rival the profits of all first-run movies for a year combined.

Playing online has been an element of personal computers for years in games like Diablo, Ultima Online and Unreal. Yet never before have three companies with the heft of Microsoft, Sony and, to a lesser extent, Nintendo lined up to push online games into everyone's living room.

Sony, with its PlayStation 2, and Nintendo, with its GameCube, fired the first rounds in recent weeks, offering online adapters as accessories for their consoles.

And now there's Xbox Live, backed by the promise of a $2-billion investment during the next five years. The service will follow the path of most things Microsoft: in your face, whether you like it or not. You'll see Xbox Live on television, in the malls, in your mailbox and in newspaper ads.

Microsoft says it's likely that only hard-core gamers will pony up for the service right away, paying $50 for a headset communicator and a one-year membership. They'll also need to buy a broadband Internet connection, for about $40 a month, if they don't already have one.

Even so, according to the company, about 55,000 folks paid for the privilege to test Xbox Live during the last few months. Microsoft hopes to nearly double the number of subscribers by year's end.

And this is just the beginning. The ultimate goal is to use games to attract a strong base of people online, and then to add so many compelling products and options that those people bring in others who are new to this type of entertainment -- changing video game consoles from a novelty into a household necessity, like a television or telephone.

Sony, for instance, is planning an add-on to the PlayStation 2 that will record TV shows to a hard drive, much like TiVo. And what if Xbox Live someday offers music, movies and serial games that add new episodes weekly like your favorite TV show? What if you could play poker with your cousins in California while chatting as if you're on a dirt-cheap long-distance phone call?

It's all about capitalizing on a large market of players who are growing older and more diverse. The average age of people who play video games today is 28, and 43 percent are women, according to the Interactive Digital Software Association, a national group that monitors the video game industry.

Krystal Smith, 26, has been a voluntary tester for Xbox Live since September, playing from her east-side Detroit home. She has also tried PlayStation 2's new online capability.

Smith, who said she has played video games on a number of platforms for years, said online games offer something special: the ability to play against another human, rather than vying against artificial

intelligence -- even if one's friends and family aren't around.

"Usually when you play against the computer, the AI doesn't respond like a human does. . . . It kind of gets redundant," she said.

Other perks of online gaming are a wider field of people to compete against and with. Online gaming offers not just the chance to be the best on your block, but also the best in the whole state or country or world. Players can achieve a social status that may be out of reach in real life.

That also can be the phenomenon's downfall.

"I've actually seen Web sites where people date and sit in front of the computer," Smith said. "I had a coworker who did it once."

For parents who already worry about people their children may meet on the Web, online gaming offers another frontier of concern: Xbox Live and some Sony games will allow people to talk directly to each other instead of typing messages. But the option can be turned off, or the child's voice can be masked by the computer.

Some people get so involved in online gaming that they allow it to replace other social interaction in their lives. Smith said she's already had to set limits.

"You lose track of time. When I first got Xbox Live the first week . . . I just played," she said. "I looked up and it was like 11 o'clock at night."

When it launches Friday, Xbox Live will cater at first to younger male gamers, with eight or so titles that are mainly sports and battle games. But there are more coming, including a Star Wars title and versions of popular games like the action-packed Halo and RalliSport Challenge, a car racing game. Expect a few surprises designed to draw more women and older folks on board, too.

Sony has nine games available, most notably Socom: U.S. Navy Seals, and is leaving costs up to each individual game maker. So far, all of the games are free to play online. Nintendo has just one game out so far, Phantasy Star Online Episode I and II, and there is an $8.95 monthly fee.

Although insiders expect that online gaming may take some time to grow, they firmly believe it's the right move. Even the folks at Sega of America, who tried and failed with online gaming for their Dreamcast machine last year, think the time is right to take gaming to a bigger stage.

Just how big can it be?

"That's the golden question that everybody will be watching this fall," said Gwen Marker, a Sega official.