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AN UNREAL THRILL; OUTDOORS VIDEO GAMES ARE IN

By Aaron Kuriloff Staff writer

Mike Facey found the big trout in Lunker Lake.

He caught it on a green plastic worm and fought it for at least 10 minutes. The fish leaped and dived. Facey strained on the reel. His friends huddled around. And when he finally pulled the 16-pound behemoth to the boat, they all wanted to see one thing -- the instant replay.

Lunker Lake exists within Facey's video game console, set up in a corner on the television set at Rigolets Marina. The game, Agetec's "Bass Landing," allows anglers to fish for a variety of species in four virtual lakes. It uses a reel-shaped controller that requires players to perform authentic casting motions. It has become very popular at the marina during the past few weeks.

"I've got my customers doing it," Facey said. "I've got vendors hitting it on the way in. Little kids pop in here with their parents. We're keeping a list of the biggest fish. Mine's holding the lead."

"Bass Landing" represents the latest incarnation of one of the fastest-growing themes in computer entertainment: virtual hunting and fishing. Outdoors games, most of which require a 200 MHz Pentium II processor and at least 120 megabytes of hard disk space, have become the most popular computer sports games, outselling even titles such as "Madden Football" or "NHL Hockey."

According to PC Data, an industry market research firm, consumers purchased about \$41.5 million worth of outdoor video games last year, representing 45 percent of the sports game market. Golf held second on the list, with about 16 percent.

That popularity, experts say, began with "Deer Hunter," a game released in 1997 as a cooperation between GT Interactive Software's WizardWorks label and the Wal-Mart retail chain. In that game, players slowly explore low-resolution virtual forest in search of deer.

Darci Nagorski, a spokeswoman for WizardWorks, said that when the company released "Deer Hunter," few had any idea how popular it would become.

"We weren't sure how it would do, but it sold 12,000 units that first weekend and went on to sell about 1.5 million units total," Nagorski said. "A hit in this industry is anywhere from 100,000 to 200,000 units. Then, after three months on the shelf, it was the best-selling game in the country. And people really noticed it."

"Deer Hunter" remains the best-selling outdoor game ever. WizardWorks now publishes 19 outdoor titles, ranging from "Trophy Hunter: African Safari" to "Bird Watcher: The Interactive Birding Game." The company made about half the titles sold in the outdoor genre last year.

"As our products continued to sell very well, we realized that there was a big audience of hunters -- 10 million plus. People like to do on the computer what they do in real life, if they can find something they're interested in.

"So we market to the casual gamer, which really suits who we're selling to. These are not going to be high-end, hardcore gamers. Most are going to be adults in the same audience that buys hunting and fishing stuff."

Other companies are trying similar approaches to appeal to that market. Field and Stream magazine collaborated with Sierra Sports on a line of outdoor games. Activision began cooperating with Cabela's, an outdoor retailer. Experts say the genre allows software manufacturers to produce realistic games at low cost. Because adults typically don't play all the latest games, companies can spend less on technological development and marketing. Typical computer games cost between \$30 and \$60; the average outdoor game costs closer to \$20.

"We save a lot in development costs," Nagorski said. "We have lower marketing costs. We can take a lot more risks and test what's hot. With 'Deer Hunter,' we just found a new market."

Despite those advantages, says Ken Weber, who designed parts of Sierra Sports' "Field and Stream Trophy Bass," outdoor games represent complex challenges to designers and players. In Weber's game, the variety of lures, rods and other gear anglers can select adds up to more than 10,000 possible permutations. They can fish on three-dimensional models of 15 real lakes. The game rewards anglers who pay attention to the minutiae of preparation and gear choice.

Designers must account for all the complex environmental elements in those models when creating artificial intelligence algorithms to govern the behavior of electronic fish. They must create fish that bite on topwater baits some days and jigheads on others. And the game's close mimicry of real life presents aesthetic challenges.

"Other games don't do lily pads, water surface, underwater structure and stumps," Weber said. "People may not know what the surface of Planet Xenon looks like, but everyone's seen a lily pad."

Whatever the visual realism, Paul Giambrone III says, consumers shouldn't mistake the games for accurate hunting and fishing simulations. The 14-year-old from New Orleans finished third at the World Skeet Shooting Championships in San Antonio in October. He plays a variety

of computer games, including a sequel to "Deer Hunter."

"It's a fun game," he said. "It gives you a little knowledge of what hunting is like. I haven't played in a long time. Me and my dad play off and on."

But he doesn't like the games that seek to imitate his preferred sport: skeet shooting.

"(The games) give all the correct angles, but the leads are all messed up," he said.

Nevertheless, Facey says, the fish in his game behave pretty much like the fish outside his bait shop. He can patrol the computerized lake in a bass boat, scanning the depth finder for potential fishing locations. When he finds a spot, he can stop the boat, maneuver closer with a trolling motor, and cast by depressing a button and swinging his arm. When a fish strikes, the reel/controller vibrates in his hands. To set the hook, he must yank back and up.

Facey raised three children, so he'd played some video games before. But the gamut of sports arcade games never really appealed to him.

"I like this game a lot better," he said. "Football's exciting, but with this, I can open the back door, look at the boats and the breeze, and it's just like fishing."

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