

Movie toys are hot for kids

By Rachel Beck
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — He flies, flounders and flips, and this fancy footwork is turning Super Mario 64 into a big hit of the holiday season.

Running on Nintendo's new home video game player, Super Mario is one of the most sought-after toys this Christmas, along with Pilot Wings and Mortal Kombat Trilogy, two other games for the just-released Nintendo 64 system.

"Video games are coming on strong this year," said Gary Jacobson, an analyst at Jefferies & Co. in New York. "That's generating a lot of excitement for toys in general because it's bringing more people into the stores."

That may mean strong sales for other toys on kids' wish lists, including Barbie, Star Wars action figures, Goosebumps and anything tied to the new movies "101 Dalmatians" and "Space Jam." A barrage of classics from Monopoly to Mr. Potato Head are also expected to be big sellers.

After several years of soft sales, video games are coming back, led by the launch of Nintendo 64, which uses advances in computer chip and software design to create three-dimensional game play. The system costs about \$200 in stores, with each game tacking on an additional \$70 on average.

Sony's PlayStation and Sega's Saturn, while on the market for a year, are also quite popular and are helping to revive interest in video games. Both game players retail for about \$200, with games costing an average of about \$50 each.

While these high-tech systems are expensive, parents are already scrambling to find them in time for the holidays and retailers are struggling to meet customer demand.

"There are no screaming gotta-haves this Christmas, but there are a few hot products that everyone will be going after," said Margaret Whitfield, an analyst at Hancock Institutional Equity in New York. "That's sending parents to stores now before stocks sell out."

That's a good sign for the toy industry, which depends on the fourth quarter for about 65 percent of all its sales.

Sales hit \$20 billion last year and analysts predict that amount will grow by 4 percent to 6 percent in 1996.

"Unlike last year, the economy is pretty good right now and people are willing to spend," said Frank Reysen, editor of Playthings magazine, a New York-based trade publication. "That should make it a good Christmas season after a few lackluster years."

Mattel Inc.'s Barbie still reigns as the top-selling doll, with a few new looks this year, including pet doctor and scuba diver outfits. Holiday Barbie is having another big year, with inventories already low in some parts of the country.

Kenner's Juice'n Cookies Baby Alive, which sips, chews and dirties her diaper, is a strong contender in the doll segment, as are Mattel's Cabbage Patch Kids, especially its new SnackTime Kid that looks like it's really eating.

Demand for action figures is strong again this year, with Batman, Star Wars and GI Joe among the hot picks.

And, as usual, toys with movie and television tie-ins are expected to be on many shopping lists. Store shelves are filled with toys from Michael Jordan's new animated film "Space Jam" and Disney's "101 Dalmatians" and "The Hunchback of Notre Dame."

In addition, the video release of "Toy Story," the box-office hit from last Christmas, has awakened interest in classic toys like Mr. Potato Head and Slinky Dog, which are featured in the film.

Kids also want anything that's tied to Goosebumps, the children's books written by R.L. Stine. Glow-in-the-dark flashlights, scary-faced figures and board games are a few of the Goosebumps-themed toys.

Parents also are turning to creative and educational toys, especially with children becoming more computer savvy and more families owning PCs.

"Toys are entertainment,

and entertainment is about building on your intelligence," said Judy Ellis, chairwoman for the New York's Fashion Institute of Technology's toy department. "This year, we're seeing a lot of toys and interactive software that bring children into creative play."

Tiger Electronics' My First Laptop teaches pre-schoolers



"Space Jam" The Movie has led to the creation to many new toys that kids are going wild over.

counting and matching on a battery run system, which also can be hooked into a home computer for more advanced applications. V-Tech's Smart Start Speak & Listen Computer is geared for elementary school students learning spelling and math.

Tyco's \$100 VideoCam, which connects to a VCR to allow kids to shoot their own black-and-white videos, also is a popular pick, as are the computer drawing system kidDraw, made by kidBoard, and Tiger Electronics' Brain Warp, a fast-paced hand-held game.

Also going high-tech are classic board games, with titles like Monopoly, Clue and Battleship available on CD-ROM. Barbie has a new CD-ROM that lets kids create their own fashion designs, print them and then make the outfits.

Although retail sales and consumer confidence have rebounded in 1996, the toy industry is still using aggressive tactics to attract shoppers.

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