

URL: <http://www.abqjournal.com/news/metro/568955metro06-07-07.htm>

Thursday, June 7, 2007

Chuck E. Serves Up Pizza, Fun, Guns

By Eric Billingsley

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Parents might be in for a surprise the next time they visit kiddie party haven Chuck E. Cheese's. Among renovations occurring in many of the restaurants nationwide is a new selection of video games, some of which skew toward older kids and their dads.

Among the arrivals are gun-themed games such as "Johnny Nero Action Hero," "Aliens" and "Extreme Hunting 2: Tournament Edition," as well as war-themed games such as "VR Vortek V3" and "After Burner."

Chuck E. Cheese's is trying to appeal to more than toddlers, according to company officials and financial experts. But some Albuquerque media experts and child advocates worry that the company's introduction of more shoot-'em-up games sets a bad precedent.

"It's disappointing at a time when we're concerned about violence in society that a restaurant chain that markets to children would change its games to focus more on guns and violence," says Bill Jordan, policy director for New Mexico Voices for Children.

Irving, Texas-based CEC Entertainment Inc. owns 528 Chuck E. Cheese's worldwide, two in Albuquerque. The company is investing \$56 million in store upgrades nationwide.

The restaurant at the corner of Wyoming and Montgomery in Albuquerque was recently remodeled. Additional game room space, new rides and a new interior look are a few of the changes. The store next to Cottonwood Mall also got some new games.

A portion of the new and additional games being introduced nationwide target 10- to 12-year-olds and their fathers, says CEC spokeswoman Brenda Holloway.

The company's broad demographic is children ages 2 to 11 and its "sweet spot" is ages 3 to 8, Holloway says. It has never had a policy against war- and gun-themed games and tries to keep violence levels down, she says. And the new game packages don't include games with yellow or red sticker ratings, which the American Academy of Pediatrics says indicate content in one of four categories: animated violence, lifelike violence, sexual content and language.

But as more games are introduced into the restaurants as part of the renovations, those with gun and war themes are likely to be more visible, according to Holloway.

"As times have changed, games have changed and we're trying to keep up with what's being offered (better graphics, for example)," she says. "You're never going to please everybody, and we're trying to hit the middle of the road."

Omar Ahmed, director of communications for the New Mexico Media Literacy Project, a nonprofit outreach program of Albuquerque Academy, says these types of games send a couple of messages to kids.

"Anything with a gun sends a message that could imply violence, whether the games are violent or not," says Ahmed, noting television, film and other media children are exposed to daily often depict

guns in relation to violence.

The games might also perpetuate the idea that young boys and their dads are supposed to play with guns. "My immediate thought is that it's a continual promotion of stereotypical gender roles," Ahmed says.

But consumers shoulder some of the responsibility for businesses choosing to add these types of games, he says.

Holloway says Chuck E. Cheese's is trying to introduce games customers want. And customers' tastes are influenced by other media sources, Ahmed says.

There are also different views on the appropriateness of video games with guns and violence.

"But at some point somebody has to take responsibility to say, 'We don't want that in our business, classroom, community or homes,'" says Ahmed. "Consumers actually have one of the strongest voices, if they want to change it."

CEC's push to renovate stores and appeal to an older crowd seems to be paying off.

Following some financial miscues in 2005, related to marketing and rising fuel costs, the company has experienced five consecutive quarters of positive same-store sales gains, according to Bill Baldwin of Baldwin Anthony Securities Inc. in Dallas, a financial analyst that tracks CEC.

"I think as they put in the enhanced game packages, they're trying to keep kids in the stores as long as they can," says Baldwin. "Historically, they've been doing good to keep kids interested until the age of 9."

Vending revenue has also been on the rise, and video games make up a significant portion of that part of the business, says Bob Derrington, a financial analyst with Morgan Keegan & Company in Nashville, Tenn., who also tracks CEC.

"Given the broadened relevancy, it's a great business model," says Derrington, adding that same-store sales gains are projected to remain positive for the remainder of the year. But he says if the company is bringing in more violent games to appeal to an older crowd, it runs the risk of alienating some customers. "The name has been built on appealing to the family."

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