

Innovative service wins bank backing

Chch firm launches try-before-you-buy games sales on-line

by Roger Dennis

A Christchurch games retailer will this week launch an innovative on-line service on Cybermall, after becoming the first organisation in New Zealand to receive support from Westpac for credit card transactions over the Net.

The service, devised by Gamescape Interactive, heralds a new era of games buying in New Zealand.

Gamescape directors Michael Widener and Simon St Claire say that shrink-wrapped boxes on store shelves can provide only limited information about a game, and that people will be better informed about products once they have visited the Gamescape Web site.

The site, which is optimised for slow links such as 14.4kbps modems, not only lets users buy software, but also offers reviews, videos of gameplay, and downloadable demonstrations.

"You read the game review, see the video, download the demo, play the game, and then you buy," says Mr Widener.

He says the ability to view a video of actual gameplay is unique. "We did a Yahoo search of 40 game sites around the world and not one had videos."

For a set fee, Gamescape also offers prospective buyers the ability to trial a game for a week before buying.

This approach contrasts with the policies of some Christchurch retailers, who will not accept a returned game once the box has been opened. Mr St Claire says "some games just won't work on some machines", and the "test drive" service is essentially a compatibility test.

Gamescape operates entirely over the Internet and has no physical retail presence. However, it is the banking aspect of the business which will be followed most closely by industry observers.

The initial plan was for revenue to move directly from the buyer's account to Gamescape's account via the bank.

The customer would enter credit card details through a secure server and this information would go directly to the bank which would then credit Gamescape. The only paperwork that Gamescape would see would be the order form.

Inquiries to various banks revealed that the infrastructure needed to implement this plan was not available.

The company has been forced to adopt a pseudo-Internet banking system involving a degree of paper shuffling, and Westpac has thrown its support behind the idea.

Mr St Claire says Gamescape is the only New Zealand company dealing in



PHOTO: DEAN KOZANIC

Simon St Claire, top, and Michael Widener, of Gamescape Interactive, are filling a gap in the retail computer games market.

Internet commerce that Westpac is supporting.

"In effect, we are guinea pigs for the system," he says.

Gamescape hopes that its electronic banking plan will eventually be implemented through further co-operation with Westpac.

The main benefit for the customer is peace of mind, says Mr Widener.

"The customer is essentially doing business with Westpac when doing business with us."

Gamescape has followed another overseas trend by adopting virtual warehousing. It has no warehouse and holds

no stock on its premises. When an order is made, it is forwarded to the distributor, which then sends the game directly to the customer.

"Virtual warehousing is big in the United States," says Mr St Claire.

"Currently nobody is doing it here, and we did have a bit of trouble convincing a couple of distributors."

He believes that the concept will soon be more widely adopted.

Gamescape Interactive can be found at www.gamescape.co.nz