

Gaming systems will add to summertime bills

Nintendo Wii

Using an average of just 16 watts in Active mode, the Wii is the juice sipper of the group. Attracting buyers with novel, interactive game play rather than power hungry, high-end graphics, the Wii uses far less power to operate than its competitors.

Microsoft Xbox 360

Consuming an average of 119 watts in Active mode, the Xbox 360 sits in the middle of this widely spaced field, the Xbox does offer users a built-in auto power-down option, but the feature is disabled by default and buried deep in the system menu.

Sony PlayStation 3

Burning through an average of 150 watts in Active mode, the Sony PS3 draws the highest amount of power of the video game consoles on the market in 2007. In October 2008 Sony introduced a power management feature via online update, but it too is disabled by default.

Today, more than 40 percent of all homes in the United States have at least one video game system. And with kids home from school for the summer, parents need a new strategy that will help them conquer those high-tech devices' quest for power.

Recently the National Resources Defense Council conducted a study of the energy demands from gaming systems such as the Sony Playstation 3, the Microsoft Xbox 360 and the Nintendo Wii. They discovered that they consumed an estimated 16 billion kilowatt-hours per year — roughly equal to the annual electricity use of the city of San Diego.

Through the incorporation of more user-friendly power management features, the NRDC believes Americans could save approximately 11 billion kilowatt-hours of electricity per year, cut our nation's electricity bill by more than \$1 billion per year and avoid emissions of more than 7 million tons of carbon dioxide each year.

This figure was based on the assumption that half of the users left their gaming systems on all the time. For this reason, gamers can significantly reduce the energy consumed by their consoles through simple steps like turning off the console when not actively playing a game or watching a movie. Another big energy saving step is to turn on energy saving features in the games' settings.

Most gaming systems have power management features, but by default these settings are in the off mode. Consumers should make themselves aware of these features and be sure to set them in the most efficient mode, which will power down the system after a period of inactivity.

In its November 2008 issue paper, NRDC provided recommendations for users, video game console manufacturers, component suppliers and the software companies that design games for improving the efficiency of video game consoles already in homes as well as future generations of machines yet to hit the shelves.

Parents choosing new systems for their kids should consider other advice from the study. For example, the NRDC found that the Nintendo Wii uses one-seventh the power of the Sony Playstation and one-ninth the power of the Xbox during game play. Both the Playstation and the Xbox offer a higher level of play, requiring more power to generate 3-D graphics. Both companies continued to optimize their systems for energy savings following the early release of these systems, meaning newer consoles will be more energy efficient than older ones. And Sony introduced a power management feature available online in October 2008, but this feature is off by default and must be enabled by the user.

In addition to powering down when the game console is not being used, homeowners can realize savings if the TV monitor is energy efficient as well. It's not unusual for parents to pass down an older, inefficient TV set to their kids for use with the gaming system. It might be wiser to consider an Energy Star rated set, especially one equipped with an auto-shutoff sleep setting.

Finally, one of the best methods to save money may be the most obvious — limiting game play time. Set strict time limits for gaming and instead encourage outdoor play whenever possible — making sure that the system gets shut down when the time is up.

Here's how to enable energy saving software in the PlayStation and Xbox systems. (Ask the kids for help.)

PlayStation 3

Turn on the Sony Playstation. At the main menu screen scroll to the left to the System Settings tab, then scroll down to Power Save Settings and press select.

Xbox 360

Turn on the Xbox 360 without a disc in the drive. At the main menu screen scroll to the right to the System tab and press the green A button on your controller to select Console Setting.