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KUTV's Greener Living Project

Environmentalists Want 'Greener' Video Game Systems

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(Photo: The power button illuminates on a Microsoft Xbox 360 video game console)

Written by Jennifer LeClaire - NewsFactor

KUTV - Greenpeace has released the results of its investigation into hazardous materials in next-generation video game consoles. The study reveals that the Nintendo Wii, Sony PlayStation 3 Elite and Microsoft Xbox 360 have all tested positive for hazardous chemicals.

The analysis of these toxic materials -- polyvinyl chloride (PVC), phthalates, beryllium and bromine, which is indicative of brominated flame retardants -- are contained in the organization's new report, entitled "Playing Dirty," and show that all three manufacturers failed the green-electronics test established by Greenpeace.

"Whether game consoles are classified as toys or not, they can still contain hazardous chemicals and materials that could harm humans," said Dr. Kevin Brigden of the Greenpeace Science Unit. "The technology is available for the manufacturers to design out toxins and produce greener game consoles now."

Are Greener Game Consoles Possible?

The report reveals that both the Xbox 360 and PS3 contained very high levels of phthalates that are not permitted in components of toys or childcare products sold in the European Union. One of the phthalates, DEHP, is known to interfere with sexual development in mammals -- including humans, and especially males. The other phthalate, DINP, found only in the Xbox 360, is prohibited from use in toys and childcare products in the European Union if children can place them in their mouths.

All game consoles tested positive for various hazardous chemicals. For example, high levels of bromine were found in the components of all three, with the highest by weight levels in the PS3 and the Wii. But the tests also showed that each of the manufacturers avoided or reduced the use of individual hazardous substances in certain materials within their consoles.

In the Nintendo Wii, beryllium alloys were not identified in electrical contacts, and the use of PVC and phthalates was determined to be limited. At the same time, the PS3 included examples of "bromine-free" circuit boards, and the Xbox 360 had a lower usage of brominated substances within housing materials.

"Our test clearly shows that a greener game console is possible," said Casey Harrell, a Greenpeace toxics campaigner. "By combining the best practices of each console design, we could replace most of the hazardous chemicals found in these game consoles with toxic-free materials."

Do Gamers Really Care?

The game-consoles market is one of the fastest-growing in consumer electronics, with more than 60 million sold and 14 percent growth last year, according to Datamonitor. They not only contain hazardous chemicals, but also contribute to the fastest-growing type of waste -- e-waste, according to Greenpeace. Discarded game consoles are often dumped and end up in unsafe and dirty recycling yards in developing countries, harming the environment and the health of workers.

Michal Ann Strahilevitz, Ph.D., an associate professor of marketing at Golden Gate University who studies corporate social responsibility and green consumer behavior, said a typical video game consumer is not likely to care that much about the toxins. But the companies may still make further strides to rid their products of them, for the greater good.

"I do think a company like Microsoft, that has made major steps toward carbon neutrality, and has invested a great deal in sustainability across the company, will likely do what they can to reduce any toxic materials in their portion of this market," Strahilevitz said.

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