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Game Changers In Motion

By SEAN FLACK

Kinect for the Xbox 360 offers a whole new gaming experience

When Nintendo released the Wii in 2006, it was—to say the least—a game changer. For the first time, a company had been successful in releasing a console that centered around interactivity. Microsoft and Sony couldn’t compete with the initial popularity of the Wii, because part of what made it popular was that it appealed to everyone. Frat boys, grandmas and even people who didn’t like video games would huddle together to try their hand at “Wii Bowling.” Putting the popularity aspect aside, the Wii also ushered in a new age of how we play video games. In the old western town of gaming, the Wii was the new sheriff in town.

In retaliation—albeit one that took about four years—Sony released the Playstation Move. But the company that’s really giving the Wii a run for its money is Microsoft. What differentiates Microsoft’s Kinect from the Playstation Move and the Nintendo Wii is that the Kinect is completely controller-less. But in this age of laziness and apathy, are people ready to interact more with their video games? Or, is it even possible to?

One of the draws of video games has always been that you can sit down and immerse yourself in a different world only by sitting on the couch and moving your thumbs. Even the Wii, the Move and popular games such as “Rock Band” can be played sitting down. Granted you can sit down with some games for the Kinect, but this is no flicking of a thumb — these actions require bigger movements.

While certain games vary in difficulty, the Kinect is a cool experience. It works through a sensor device attached to the Xbox, ideally under the TV screen. When you start it up, the Kinect will ask you to stand still as it registers your body. In addition to a sensor, there’s also a camera that is responsible for picking up your movements, facial features and voice. This camera also functions as a way to embarrass yourself at the end of a game through a highlight reel of the gamer in action called “Game Highlights.” After the initial registration in the beginning, there is no other calibrating to be done, and you are free to begin the Kinect experience.

The Kinect responds well, and I had no trouble with lag or trying to find my cursor on the screen. Plus, the novelty of using no controller remains pretty fresh after playing for a while. But I have to admit, I kind of missed my controller. It wasn’t because “Kinect Sports” is a work out—and believe me, it is—but because ultimately, I felt ridiculous waving my arms everywhere.

There’s a lot to be said for having some sort of controller in your hand. It’s concrete. You can feel it. And although movies portray this style of gaming as the future, I can’t really see having any deep gaming experiences with it. No one wants to be the character. People play video games to escape. And frankly, it would just seem annoying after awhile. The Kinect requires you to stay in a certain square area so the camera can pick you up. This means that walking and running would have to be accomplished by marching in place at various speeds. As I found out while playing the track game in “Kinect Sports,” running in place is no fun at all.

But the Kinect doesn’t have any qualms about what it is. Much like its peers, the Kinect is essentially a party tool for the time being—something one brings out on family game night or when having friends over. Graphically, the Kinect trumps the Wii. Comparing “Wii Sports” to “Kinect Sports” is like comparing VHS to Blu-ray. The graphics aren’t mind-blowing by any means, but it achieves its purpose with ease by utilizing Xbox avatar graphics.

With a less-than-ideal launch lineup of games and a $149.99 price tag for what is essentially just a motion-tracking camera, the Kinect is going to have some trouble reeling in an audience past the initial craze period. Microsoft’s main challenge is going to be trying to make the Kinect into a legitimate gaming experience, something that can function as more than just an excuse to wave your arms wildly. While mini-games like bowling, volleyball and ping pong can be fun, they don’t have any staying power. There’s no depth or change. It’s constantly the same thing: an electronic board game, if you will.

Why the Wii succeeds is that in addition to its gimmicky interactive games, it has its bread and butter like Mario and Zelda to provide gaming experiences that boast a perfect balance between motion and stillness. While we may have stepped into the future of gaming, it’ll still be awhile before we can expect interactive “Grand Theft Auto” or “Red Dead Redemption.” But if that means more time spent on controllers, then maybe it’s for the best.