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STATE OF THE ART

Kinect Pushes Users Into a Sweaty New Dimension

By DAVID POGUE Published: November 4, 2010

With the money Microsoft has spent on failed efforts to design hardware, you could finance a trip to Mars.

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Stuart Goldenberg

Its failures make up quite a flop parade: WebTV. Spot Watch. Ultimate TV. Ultra Mobile PC. Tablet PC. Smart Display. Portable Media Center. Zune. Kin phone. If this were ancient Greece, you'd wonder what Microsoft had done to annoy the gods.

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There is, of course, an exception the size of Mount Olympus: the Xbox.

With 45 million game consoles sold, Xbox 360 is Microsoft's monster hardware hit. And today, what will surely be its second monster hit goes on sale: the Kinect.

Multimedia



Microsoft Advances Gaming

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Microsoft Corp., via Bloomberg The Kinect controller for the Xbox 360, with lenses in the base that track a player's movements.

The Kinect ("kinetic" plus "connect," get it?) is an add-on for the existing Xbox 360. If you already have an Xbox, you can buy the Kinect for \$150, or you can buy it with a four-gigabyte Xbox for \$300 — if you can find it in stock.

The Kinect is a glossy, foot-wide, black plastic horizontal bar. You plug its single cable into your Xbox. (If you have the bulkier, pre-2010 Xbox, you also have to plug the Kinect's power cord into the wall.) You park the Kinect itself on, or beside, your TV. During start-up, a motor moves the bar on its stand, making it scan the room up and down like some would-be Wall-E.

It has four microphones and three little lenses: a video camera, an infrared projector and a distance sensor. Together, these lenses determine where you are in the room.

And not just you. The system tracks 48 parts of your body in three-dimensional space. It doesn't just know where your hand is, like the Wii. No, the Kinect tracks the motion of your head, hands, torso, waist, knees, feet and

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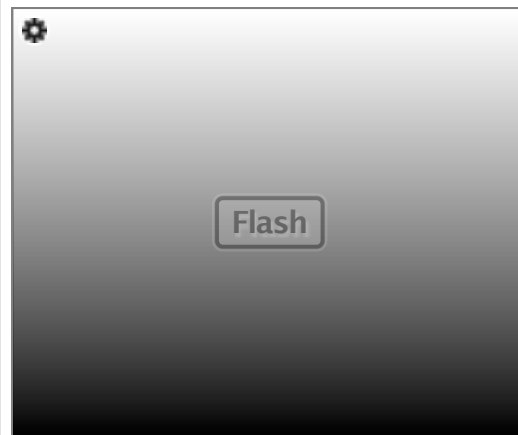
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The bowling game from the Kinect Sports collection, which also features unseen commentators.

The point is to let you control games with your body, without having to find, hold, learn or recharge a controller. Your digital stunt double appears on the TV screen. What you do, it does.

The Wii, by tracking the position of its remote control, was amazing for its time (2006). It's a natural for games in which you swing one hand — bowling, tennis, golf. But the Kinect blows open a whole universe of new, whole-body simulations — volleyball, obstacle courses, dancing, flying.

It doesn't merely recognize that someone is there; it recognizes your face and body. In some games, you can jump in to take a buddy's place; the game instantly notices the change and signs you in under your own name. If you leave the room, it pauses the game automatically.

There's a crazy, magical, omigosh rush the first time you try the Kinect. It's an experience you've never had before.

The Kinect comes with Kinect Adventures, a suite of five starter games. In 20,000 Leaks, you're at an undersea observatory where particularly aggressive fish keep poking holes in the glass; your job is to plug the leaks by touching them with any part of your body. There's also Rallyball (glorified dodgeball), Reflex Ridge (an exhausting whole-body obstacle course), Space Pop (pop bubbles in zero gravity) and River Rush (control a white-water raft by lunging and jumping). Two players can play these games together, which is fantastic.

The graphics aren't quite as simplistic as the Wii's amputated-Weebles aesthetic, but they're still cartoony. Don't expect to look especially sexy while you're playing, either. Kinect is about what you feel, not how you look. Some games make that point by snapping photos of you at especially humiliating moments. You get a quick slide show of them when the round is over.

For now, there are 17 games available, most for \$48. Microsoft says many more are on the way. They're generally simple, family-friendly, Wii-type games, not the elaborate adventure games and war simulations that Xbox fans may be used to.

Still, some are pure genius. Dance Central, for example, is like Guitar Hero for your whole body. You learn and perform dance moves by following the on-screen model, as pop songs play and the crowd cheers. Your Shape: Fitness Evolved is an interactive fitness program, complete with cardio classes and personal training.

Kinectimals is a standard explore-the-abandoned-island mystery game, made charming by baby tigers and lions that accompany you, and that arch their backs and purr when you pet them.

Kinect Sports, an obvious ripoff of Wii Sports, offers Soccer, Bowling, Beach Volleyball, Boxing, Table Tennis and Track & Field — hours of sweat for the whole family. The unseen commentators are a kick. When I scored a strike in Bowling, one said, "Liking the style of this bowler!" And when I bowled a gutter ball, he offered, "Interesting approach there!"

The novelty in Kinect Joyride wears off much faster. Pretty much all you do is turn an

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imaginary steering wheel.

You can't play Kinect sitting down, and that's a plus. I left my two youngsters alone with Kinect Adventures one afternoon. When I returned, they were drenched with sweat, panting hard and practically levitating. "Dad! Dad! Can we get one for Christmas? Please?"

Next thing you know, we'll be hearing doctors say, "I think your kids really need to play more video games."

Then again, the Kinect may not be the antidote for sedentary lifestyles. It's connected to an Xbox, with its infinite access to movies, TV shows and a million games where all you do is sit there on the couch.

The Kinect is often compared to the futuristic holographic computer-control system in the movie "Minority Report." But that degree of refinement is still decades away.

You should know, first of all, that the Kinect requires a lot of open space. You stand at least six feet away from the TV — preferably farther, especially if two are playing. Dorm rooms may be iffy.

There's way too much administrative hassle, too. Games take a long time to start up, a minute or more of company logos and repetitive Wii-style warnings.

Remember, you don't have any physical controls, so you make menu choices by "tapping" big buttons with your hand. To avoid accidental taps, you have to hold your hand still in the air for several seconds, which gets old fast.

Sometimes, you can navigate by voice instead, saying, for example, "Xbox: Sign in," or "Xbox: Sponsored trailer." Unfortunately, that's slow and inefficient in its own way.

I couldn't understand why this error message appeared whenever I completed a game: "This operation will result in a loss of player progress. Do you wish to proceed?" Come on, Microsoft. You can track 48 parts of my body, but you can't figure out how to save my game?

Navigating the Xbox/Kinect software is baffling. Where would you guess you would go to switch games: to the Dashboard, the Guide or the Hub? And good luck trying to sort out all the different Microsoft accounts you'll need: for starters a Windows Live ID, an Xbox Live Profile and a Kinect ID.

(This much I've figured out: You have to pay \$60 a year for an Xbox Live Gold membership to get some of the nicer features, like playing games against people online and having video chats with other Kinect or Windows Messenger members.)

Finally, note that the body tracking isn't as quick or precise as the Wii's remote-tracking. When you jump, there's a slight delay before your on-screen character jumps. My fitness instructor in Your Shape kept tsk-ing that I wasn't in sync with her, even though I swear I was.

But few normal people will mind. The Kinect's astonishing technology creates a completely new activity that's social, age-spanning and even athletic. Microsoft owes a huge debt to the Nintendo Wii, yes, but it also deserves huge credit for catapulting the motion-tracking concept into a mind-boggling new dimension. Just this once, the gods have lifted the Curse of the Microsoft Hardware.

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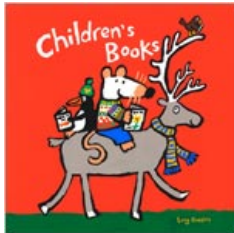
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