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Games With Get Up and Go

New Controllers Push Players Off the Couch and Into Action

By Don Oldenburg
Washington Post Staff Writer
Tuesday, December 7, 2004; Page C01

Video gaming has long suffered a reputation for creating sedentary and solitary zombies, pasty and pudgy except for their muscular thumbs. A growing number of games, however, are getting gamers off their couches and on their feet, not only shouting, gyrating, singing and dancing, but sometimes -- gasp! -- playing nicely with others, face-to-face, in groups.

What these new gaming devices have in common is a desire to do away with the keyboard and the joystick. Instead, they engage much more of the players' bodies to control the games. Some use tiny video cameras to read the player's body motion, thereby controlling, for example, a hoverboard (a flying skateboard) shown on the screen. Others recognize voice commands. Some even require the player to sing or play drums to control the game. Think Tom Cruise in the Steven Spielberg film "Minority Report," speaking to the computer and waving his hands in a surreal ballet to control it. That's the direction these games are taking.

"The EyeToy allows us to turn your body into the controller," says Joe Brisbois, a producer of EyeToy: AntiGrav, from SCEA (Sony Computer Entertainment America). "You lean left and it leans the character to the left," guiding a hoverboarding character on-screen through virtual obstacles and environments. "We relied on that instinct that kids have to give us the first step in bridging the gap from controlling their controller with their thumbs to using their bodies. . . . It kind of pushes the interactive experience you're having in your living room in a different direction."

Other games and computer software are also introducing alternatives. Last year's SOCOM II: U.S. Navy Seals complemented standard controller play with headsets



An EyeToy camera places the player's face on that of a skater in Gretzky NHL 2005, one of a number of advances that give gamers a more active role. (Courtesy Publisher)

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that connected players to virtual characters with basic voice commands. Lifeline, out earlier this year from the Japanese game maker Kanomi, is the first action game controlled primarily by voice recognition. Its makers claimed Lifeline could handle 5,000 words, though critics panned the technology as unreliable and not ready for prime-time gaming.

Using EyeToy cameras, Electronic Arts' Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban allows gamers to appear on-screen catching snitches -- those devilishly elusive flying gizmos in Quidditch matches. The new Gretzky NHL 2005, from SCEA, features an EyeToy function that lets a player project his own face onto an NHL player in the game.

In Konami's new Karaoke Revolution, Volume 3, players' singing voices drive the competition. Sing "Love Shack," for example, and the game will rate you based on how well you stay on pitch. Konami's Dance Dance Revolution Extreme not only uses a foot mat that reads a player's dance steps to control the game, it has added the EyeToy to show the booty-shakin' players on the game's on-screen dance floor. Another rhythm-genre newcomer is Nintendo's Donkey Konga, which requires you to bang on wired bongo drums to work the game. Get the rhythms right and the game progresses. Play like Prince Charles and the game slows to a crawl.

But why stop there? Why not meditative software? Calling itself "the first inner-active adventure," Wild Divine connects three biofeedback finger sensors that monitor heart rate and perspiration to control what's happening on-screen. Stay serene, for example, and the on-screen juggler keeps all the balls in the air. Get jiggy, and you get a floor full of spheres. Seemingly cribbing from William Gibson's "Neuromancer" novel is current research using brain-wave headsets that will one day enable a player to control a game using brain impulses only. Oh, well. So much for getting gamers off the couch.

Some persevere, however. Yourself!Fitness, a new Xbox title from ResponDesign, provides a virtual personal trainer who interacts with players to create a customized fitness and diet program. Its creator, Phin Barnes, was actually trying to apply advancing game technology to make games that are good for you. Ironically, he has produced one that turns the tables: This fitness game controls the player, rather than the other way around.

"This is the first game that plays you instead of you playing the game," says Barnes, a former college basketball player. "You go in it and enter your fitness profile, and your personal trainer identifies weaknesses and sets goals for you. Every day you come in, you get motivated in a different way based on how you are feeling."

Barnes sees incredible potential for computers evolving into full-body interaction devices. "Allowing people to interact more ways than just with their thumbs is a great goal but it will take time," he says.

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But hands-off -- and off-your-butt -- programs aren't for all gamers. One calling himself "Nathan the Lazy" wrote in a gamer newsgroup recently: "If all they can come up with is those silly dance mats and EyeToy things for their innovative stuff, they're not going to get me hooked at all. I look on gaming as being a relaxed pursuit! The limits of the physical exertion I'm willing to put into games is those decathlon-type joystick-wagging ones."

J.C. Herz, author of the 1997 book "Joystick Nation: How Videogames Ate Our Quarters, Won Our Hearts and Rewired Our Minds," says off-controller devices are marginal products at best. "No one throws away their joypad when a bongo drum game comes along, and when Halo 2 or the next hot PlayStation sports game comes along, it's back to the joypad," says Herz. "These things are novelties."

Richard Marks, SCEA's manager of research and development, who had a hand in creating the EyeToy technology, acknowledges alternative controllers make sense in some games and not in others. But the technology is advancing toward a seamless mix of different input devices for each program or game, he says.

"Once you can do voice recognition, track the body and get forced feedback in the controllers, there will be a really rich palette," says Marks, who envisions the day in the not-so-distant future when his son can just say "Spider-man" and he will suddenly appear in the video game wearing a Spider-man costume.

"And then he just flicks his arm and a web shoots out of his fingertips," he says. "It's not that far off, really."

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