

Video Game Makers To Show New Ways To Play

Manufacturing.net

NEW YORK (AP) -- Video game makers are about to try to convince you that fancy 3-D screens, gesture-recognition cameras and ultra-sensitive motion controllers topped with brightly glowing spheres are what you need to have a good time.

They'll do this as they try to emerge from a slump in the recession, which shocked a business long believed to be protected from, if not totally immune to, the workings of the broader economy.

Much of the industry's success this year is riding on whether Microsoft, Nintendo, Sony and game publishers are able to sway consumers toward new, maybe even pricey ways to experience games -- even as free or inexpensive options on Facebook, smart phones and the iPad compete for their attention.

Beginning next week at E3, as the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles is called, game companies will show off several new mechanisms for playing games. Among them will be Move, which is Sony's new motion controller for the PlayStation 3 and launches this fall, when it is expected to cost less than \$100. A black remote with a color-changing ball on top, it builds on the success of the Nintendo Wii's popular motion-control wand, but it promises more precision. A camera called PlayStation Eye recognizes the glowing orb and uses it to track the remote's position in a 3-D space, further immersing players in the game.

Even so, Fidel Martinez may need a bit of convincing. The 19-year-old PlayStation 3 owner says he likes his button-filled video game controllers just fine, thank you. Walking out of New York's Nintendo World store recently after buying a wallet, Martinez said he doesn't think he'll buy Move.

"It's too weird," said Martinez. "The times I've played (motion-controlled) games has been strange. I'd rather use the old kind."

Sony is betting he'll change his mind. Richard Marks, senior researcher at the company and the brains behind Move, thinks the controller will appeal to gamers like Martinez, even if they snubbed the Wii's gesturing wand as kids' stuff.

"One of our design goals was to make sure it stood out as a completely different experience that has never been seen before," Marks said.

Serious gamers like Martinez are not the only ones on Sony's radar. The company has been pouring millions of dollars into marketing the PlayStation 3 with the tag line "It only does everything." The goal is to rope in consumers more likely to watch movies and play party games than shoot on-screen enemies for hours on end.

"In many regards we are treating the launch of Move like the launch of a new

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platform," said Peter Dille, senior vice president of marketing for Sony Computer Entertainment. "We believe (it) will help us expand the audience of PS3 users."

Microsoft, too, wants to expand its gaming audience -- a concept Nintendo mastered with the 2006 launch of the Wii, which got moms, grandmas and grandpas playing alongside kids as young as 4 or 5.

Natal, Microsoft's upcoming game technology, uses a camera and gesture recognition to turn players' bodies into controllers. After the camera recognizes you -- your body shape and movements down to the smallest toss of your hair, you'll be able to swing your hands to swipe at on-screen dodge balls or pretend you're Godzilla and smash virtual buildings with swing of your arm. You could even scan in your real-life skateboard to ride a version of it in a game.

"This is really what we like to think of as the rebirth of our brand," said Dennis Durkin, chief operating officer of Microsoft's video game business. "We're trying to set the stage for the next 10 years."

To do that, Microsoft needs to keep appealing to its core gamer fans, mostly men in their 20s, 30s and 40s who count "Halo," "Call of Duty" and "Gears of War" among their favorite entertainment franchises. But, like Sony with the PlayStation 3, it's also selling the Xbox 360 to families as an all-in-one entertainment device. It already streams Netflix and connects to Facebook.

E3, which has events from Sunday through Thursday, is where many store chains will decide what games and gaming systems, and how many of them, to stock for the holiday shopping season. That period is crucial for the industry, which analysts say gets about 40 percent of its revenue in the final three months of the year.

Analyst firm DFC Intelligence estimates that the worldwide video game retail industry will reap revenue of \$59.5 billion this year, down slightly from \$60.4 billion in 2009 and well below the more than \$68 billion in 2008.

Because the industry has yet to fully rebound from the recession, Jesse Divnich, an analyst with Electronic Entertainment Design and Research, called E3 an "inflection point," with game companies under pressure to impress.

While hardcore gamers have flocked to shooters and sequels with loyal predictability, newer, more "casual" players can be fickle. Largely responsible for the runaway success of the Wii, the players who dabble in video games as a hobby but not as a lifestyle can't be expected to spend \$60 every time a new game comes out, even in a better economy. That's why it's important for game companies to sell a wide range of entertainment options.

"Something that is new, something that is true innovation, something that unlocks new experiences," said Microsoft's Durkin, is something families "are willing to pay for."

He may be right. Walking out of the Nintendo World store with her husband with

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some gifts for her daughter, stay-at-home mom Terri Marrone said she hadn't heard of the new motion controllers from Sony or Microsoft. The family has a Wii, and three Nintendo DS systems, one for each of their kids. As for another motion control system, one that doesn't even need a remote?

"We would definitely be interested," said Marrone, who lives in New Brunswick, N.J. "It sounds cool."

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