Microsoft, Sony take aim at Nintendo Wii at E3

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Nintendo CEO Satoru Iwata introduces Nintendo's new WII Vitality Sensor to check a user's pulse, at 2009 E3 Expo Nintendo Media Briefing at Club NOKIA in Los Angeles on Tuesday, June 2, 2009. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes)

(AP) -- This year's Electronic Entertainment Expo has been quite the moving experience.

During presentations at the video game industry trade show, both Microsoft and Sony debuted prototype motion-control devices for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 that could rival Nintendo's popular Wii, the first console to employ a motion-detecting controller when it debuted in 2006.

Nintendo said Wednesday they are flattered by the imitations.

"It's certainly nice for us to see other companies adopting the philosophy that Nintendo communicated back a few years ago," said Cammie Dunaway, executive vice president of sales and marketing at Nintendo of America. "For us, we're really pleased and excited to bring consumers the next advancement now with Wii MotionPlus."

Nintendo mostly used the show as an opportunity to showcase Wii MotionPlus, an attachment announced at last year's E3 that uses sensors to more precisely mimic gamers' hand movements on screen. The only new apparatus Nintendo debuted this year was the Wii Vitality Sensor, which can check a player's pulse. The doodad prompted some to wonder if Nintendo had run out of ideas.

"That sensor was slightly bizarre," said Paul Jackson, an analyst at Forrester. "But it plays into the success that Nintendo has had with 'Wii Fit' on the health and lifestyle front. I imagine that one does get a bit weary of new things that you can plug into your Wii. I just can't see the Wii Vitality Sensor having more than two or three applications."

Meanwhile, Microsoft unveiled a motion control device, codenamed "Project Natal," that combines a camera, depth sensor, microphone and processor to eliminate the need for any button-mashing input device. Microsoft said the gadget can track a players' full body movement, recognize their face and voice and respond to their physical and vocal commands.

The Xbox maker demonstrated "Project Natal" with three prototype programs: "Ricochet," a soccerlike game that requires players to use their entire bodies to bounce balls at targets; "Paint Party," an art-making program that uses a players' hands and arms as the brush; and "Milo," essentially a virtual boy who can communicate and interact with the player.

"The first two games Microsoft previewed were very polished, but 'Milo' showed where this stuff can go above and beyond in gaming," said Jackson. "I don't think people have seen anything like that outside of artificial intelligence labs in universities. It showed 'Natal' wasn't just about flaying around or responding to commands on a screen."

Sony's motion-control gizmo was decidedly less astonishing. The unnamed wand-shaped apparatus has a light-emitting sphere on the end that can be "seen" by a PlayStation Eye camera. It was demonstrated with software that transformed it on-screen into objects such as a sword, flashlight and gun with one-to-one motion control - much like Wii MotionPlus.

"If you look at the consumer that is playing 'God of War III' or playing 'Killzone 2,' they're not typically somebody who may be the biggest Wii consumer," said Jack Tretton, president at Sony Computer Entertainment America. "I think we have the opportunity to improve the experience for the casual gamer, but also address the hardcore gamer with the motion controller."

Sony promised it would conjure up the wand-shaped controller by next spring while Microsoft was mum on when "Natal" was due on store shelves. Neither company showcased any actual games for their flashy new devices, leaving many questions about the motion control technologies unanswered. Perhaps the most important one of all: Will they live up to the hype?

On the Net:

http://www.xbox.com/

http://www.nintendo.com/

http://www.playstation.com/

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