

Game developers converge on San Jose

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The official kickoff to the 2006 game developer's conference starts Wednesday with a keynote address from Phil Harrison, president of Sony Computer Entertainment. Experts say there should finally be some concrete information on the elephant in the room -- the Playstation 3. Last week Sony finally went on record that the Playstation 3 would not be arriving this spring and instead would have a world launch sometime in November.

Getting information on the Playstation 3 has been next to impossible. The keynote and private question and answer session promises to finally start answering questions about the PS3 and rumors surrounding a re-launch and re-design of the Playstation Portable.

"We're really excited to have everyone here and for the first time we're really going to be showing off the power of the Playstation 3 to developers," says Jennifer Clark, senior public relations manager, Sony Computer Entertainment. "We'll be showing off new games for the PSP and PS2, as well as tech demos for the Playstation 3. We're showing off the capabilities of the Playstation Portable. We will be making some announcements at our keynote."

Beyond the official kick off of the Playstation 3 push for developers, there were some other announcements this morning.

Nintendo made huge waves with their new Revolution controller, but that controller pales in comparison to Novint Technologies, Inc., a small company with big ideas, which has created a new interactive 3-D touch

pad called the "Novint Falcon." This technology adds high-fidelity, interactive touch to computing, changing how people play and interact with their games.

"Unlike existing 2D feedback technology, this gives you full 3 degrees of freedom and let's you feel realistic touch on the computer and let's you feel shape, texture, weight, and force," said Antonia Chappell, vice president marketing, Novint Technologies, Inc. "I think games have been missing the 3rd sense of touch and this enables you to really feel the environment. For example, in golf, usually you click a mouse and use a meter to swing the club, with our system you really get to feel the motion of the swing and impact of the club."

Users hold onto the Falcon's handle, which moves left and right and forwards and backwards, like a computer mouse, but also moves up and down. The interchangeable handle, or "end effector" can come in many shapes and forms and the device includes a quick disconnect feature which lets users change handles for specific uses or types of game play. As the Novint Falcon handle is moved, the computer keeps track of a 3-D cursor. When the 3-D cursor touches a virtual object, the computer registers contact with that object and updates currents to motors in the device to create an appropriate force to the device's handle, which the user feels.

The result was really striking, during the demo, Chappell showed off several different sample applications including a sample shooting game where we got to shoot Barney, which immediately won me over. But there was an interesting demo where a simple game of catch felt almost real, you could feel the ball going into the glove. At another, she changed the texture of a bit map to various densities and each time you could feel the difference in how the controller moved -- lightly through ice and heavy through harder surfaces.

The problem with the Falcon is the controller itself was incredibly big, while the little ball itself felt too small and after just a few minutes my hand got really tired. This correspondent can see people getting carpal tunnel syndrome using this thing for any real length of time. But the potential is there for something truly ingenious. The Falcon is scheduled to come out in 2007 a mass market price of under \$100, but of course the first round of releases will be around \$200.

Since the Pre-GDC kick off was about mobile phones, let's talk Nokia. It looks like they are finally ready to put the failed N-Gage to rest, but they won't completely kill it off. Today they announced that starting in 2007 will be launching what they call the next generation of mobile games.

Markus Huttunen, Snap! Mobile manager for Nokia, said, "We're taking the N-Gage functionality across our smart phone range. What that means is that when you pick up your normal Nokia N series device it'll be N-Gage compatible." At the pre-show booth, they even had a demo of movies that you'll be able to purchase for their new Smart phone devices, which they are calling "computers," instead of "phones."

Nokia also announced the launch of their new development program where they plan on supporting developers by providing them with all the tools, documentation and support necessary to help them navigate the murky waters of developing for Snap! Mobile. They are also working on trying to standardize their development processes so that game designers won't have to worry about creating multiple versions of their games.

The problem with current mobile games is the lack of original titles for the platform.

"So far it's just stuff that's been ported from other platforms none of it has really been designed for mobile. It's about having the ability to share your experiences, hook up with or make new friends," says Huttunen.

He added, "Everyone knows that this is what you are supposed to do, but there are too many different technology platforms to develop for, so the industry tends to play it safe. What we're doing is trying to create a stable platform that will work across multiple phones and are providing as much developer support to make the process as easy as possible for them."

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