

Microsoft releases slim new Xbox 360 videogame console (Update)

June 14 2010



Microsoft on Monday began shipping a slim, more powerful version of its Xbox 360 videogame console to US stores.

The announcement came as the US technology giant announced that its hotly-anticipated motion-sensing "Kinect" controllers for Xbox 360 consoles will be available in the United States beginning November 4.

"Kinect" is the name for the new game technology developed by Microsoft under the code name Project Natal.

The potentially revolutionary device uses a 3-D camera and gesture recognition software to let people play videogames using natural body

movements instead of hand-held controllers.

The new slim Xbox console features a 250 gigabyte hard drive, built-in high speed wireless connectivity and is priced at 299 dollars, the same as its predecessor.

During a press conference held on the eve of the start of a major Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles, Microsoft showed off an array of games for its new Kinect system.

At least 15 titles for play using Kinect will be available when the hardware add-on to Xbox consoles becomes available, according to Microsoft.

No price details were disclosed at the presentation, which provided glimpses of how Kinect lets players control on-screen characters with natural gestures instead of hand-held controllers.

"You interact with things the same way you would in the real world, with your moves and your voice," said Kinect creative director Kudo Tsunado. "Anyone can jump in and play."

Players can tell consoles what to do with simple commands such as "Xbox play music."

Microsoft games tailored for Kinect include "Kinectimals" that lets children play with and train virtual wild animals and a sports game with sprinting, the javelin throw, the long jump and more track events.

A Kinect "Joy Ride" game features car racing and stunts while an "Adventures" game which includes virtual river rafting is designed to "get the group off the couch and using the entire body to play."

Kinect cameras can take pictures of players at various points during game play and those images can be shared online at social networking service Facebook and other websites using Xbox Live Internet connections.

"Kinect recognizes you," said Marc Whitten, vice president of Xbox Live. "It responds to your gestures and it listens to your voice. There is no learning curve."

Kinect is going to be available in every country where Xbox 360 consoles are sold and will also synch with smartphones running the latest version of Windows mobile software, according to Whitten.

Kinect will also enable people to have online video chats during which people could even watch the same film.

Microsoft has a partnership with sports cable network ESPN to bring matches to Xbox using Kinect technology.

Third party studios are also tailoring titles for Kinect, with French videogame titan Ubisoft showing off a "Your Shape" exercise game in which players are immersed virtually in gyms or yoga studios.

MTV Games and Harmonix have developed a game in which players have to follow along with realistic dance routines crafted by top choreographers.

"For years we've been eager to develop a dance game but the right technology didn't exist," said Harmonix chief executive Alex Rigopolus. "As soon as we saw Kinect we realized the technology we had been waiting for had arrived."

Lucas Arts is making a Kinect videogame that will transform players

into virtual Jedi knights battling Darth Vader and the evil empire made famous by Star Wars films.

"This year's E3 gives the gaming industry the first real opportunity to prove that it's not just about making shoot-em-up games for testosterone-fueled boys," said Forrester media analyst James McQuivey.

"The secret to the gaming industry's future is the realization that game consoles are the most powerful device in the living room, ready to provide many of the interactive experiences of the future."

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Citation: Microsoft releases slim new Xbox 360 videogame console (Update) (2010, June 14) retrieved 6 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-06-microsoft-slim-xbox-videogame-console.html>

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