

Review: Kinect motion-sensing system impresses

The Associated Press

There are a lot of futuristic things we're still waiting on: jet packs for the entire family, self-driving cars and time-travel, to name a few. But one new, pretty darn amazing bit of technology has finally come to fruition, thanks to the folks at Microsoft.

The Kinect system, on sale beginning Thursday for the Xbox 360 game console, offers controller-free control of living room entertainment and aptly delivers a groundbreaking piece of technology.

It's part game controller, part fitness guru and part "Minority Report," the movie where Tom Cruise famously interacts with a multi-touch interface by making rapid motions with his hands. Instead of gripping a physical controller to play games and movies on your Xbox 360, Kinect allows you to simply move your body - hands, feet, hips - to do everything.

Kinect is a hybrid video camera and motion sensor that sits just above or below your television display. It looks like an extra wide webcam and connects to the Xbox 360 - even older models - through the USB port. Kinect sells for \$150 and comes with one game; you can buy it bundled with a low-end Xbox 360 for \$300, saving \$50 on the package.

Activating and configuring Kinect was easy enough, though it does require a system update.

Kinect calibrated itself by testing the ambient light in my room, the background noise and my own voice. Kinect then asked me to get used to performing my moves in a fairly large rectangular space about 8 feet in front of the television.

The 46-inch LCD display from Sceptre I used for my tests delivered the Kinect experience in tack-sharp high-definition. A larger-than-average display is ideal because it'll help you see the various digital versions of yourself more clearly, as captured by Kinect's camera and motion-sensing voodoo.

At the Xbox 360 main menu screen, a small dark box appeared at the lower right corner. Inside was a live view of my body, with my hands glowing at my sides. A quick wave of my right hand told Kinect I was ready to interact.

To select items on most menu screens, I simply held up my right hand at about shoulder height and guided an on-screen hand to an icon or word. In games, similar control takes place to select people and objects. Simply hover and grab.

Kinect also brings voice control to the Xbox 360, and you can launch movies and social media apps by saying something like "Xbox. Play." I had spotty success with

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that and found the hand guide technique more dependable.

The game that comes with Kinect is "Kinect Adventures," an outdoorsy jaunt into the world of whitewater rapids and antigravity. As I stood in front of my TV, I looked at my avatar's back, careening down a rushing river in an inflatable raft. As I instinctively stepped and leaned to the left, my character on-screen did so as well, steering the raft around rocks and obstacles.

In "Space Pop," I floated in a low-gravity room and waved my arms and legs to pop bubbles for points. These games were fine for a warm-up, but I was quickly ready for a more stern test.

The Kinect games now available all require the system to play them. Your physical Xbox 360 controller won't suffice. There will be Kinect-enhanced games available later that can be played both ways, but Microsoft Corp. says Kinect will give you a better experience.

I met my match with "Dance Central" (\$50, MTV Games, rated "T"). This top-shelf title is essential for Kinect users. I mimicked the on-screen character's dance moves for high scores. I jumped and gyrated to songs from top artists such as Lady Gaga and Audio Push. I learned the moves individually, with a few restarts, then launched into a dance battle to string them together to the music.

A circle beneath my on-screen feet glowed green when I hit the moves correctly. It glowed red when I muffed the moves, indicating I had suddenly sprouted at least two left feet, if not more. The music on this title is fresh, and additional tracks can be purchased through the Xbox Live Marketplace.

One title that was a dud for me was "Kinect Joy Ride," a cartoonish driving game. Driving is one of those game genres that begs for a physical controller. I had trouble keeping my hands in an imaginary grip on an imaginary steering wheel to control my imaginary car. I crashed because I overcorrected my steering. My hands moved too freely because they weren't really holding on to anything.

My wife had better luck when I raced against her. She even found time to lean over and answer a real-world cell phone call while "driving," gently cradling the phone on her shoulder while gripping her nonexistent steering wheel.

There is one title that literally left me breathless, but for all the right reasons. "Your Shape: Fitness Evolved" is a masterpiece. The exercise game talks and walks you through precise movements to improve your cardio and work out your muscles.

I began by standing in front of my TV and letting Kinect measure my body size and structure. I then used a hand-motion menu to enter my age, weight and exercise habits so the game would learn not to overexert me too soon.

Within minutes I was following along with the Tai chi and yoga moves of an on-screen instructor, with my on-screen mat placed just behind and to the right of her. She led me through the movements, and at the end of each routine I was given a

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score for my performance, based on how well I stayed in rhythm and mimicked her deep knee bends.

I would have never thought that the most impressive game title for Microsoft's foray into motion-sensor gaming would involve me invoking the phrase "Namaste" instead of "activate plasma rifle."

Motion-sensor gaming has now hit all three major gaming platforms. Nintendo Co.'s Wii arrived first. Sony Corp.'s Move for PlayStation 3 added more realistic games, graphics and highly acute player control.

Microsoft Kinect may lack the fine character control of the Move, but it adds the promise of an expanded breadth of activities in front of the gaming console. The possibilities for Kinect are rich, and I will forever more feel a touch guilty while sitting in that well-worn corner of my couch to play a video game.

Four stars out of four.

Online: <http://www.xbox.com/en-US/kinect> [1]

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