



Videogames delivering workouts along with fun

By Glenn Chapman, AFP June 5, 2009

LOS ANGELES – Videogame lovers are being coaxed off couches as the industry sprints ahead with a trend toward fitness titles and motion-sensing controllers.

The premier Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) that wrapped in Los Angeles on Thursday was rife with exercise, sports, and dance videogames that people play by moving their bodies instead of just their thumbs.

"A really exciting trend is publishers getting people off the couch and moving," said Scott Steinberg of videogame and gadget website Digital Trends.

"Videogaming doesn't always add pounds. It can burn calories instead."

Analysts credit Nintendo with revolutionizing the way videogames are played with the release in 2006 of Wii consoles with motion-sensing controllers.

Traditional controllers on consoles such as Microsoft's Xbox 360 and Sony's PlayStation 3 feature toggles and buttons players manipulate to dictate actions of videogame characters.

About a year ago, Nintendo introduced a "Wii Fit" exercise videogame with a controller shaped like a bathroom scale that senses the weight, balance and shift of pressure made by players.

The game has become a top seller worldwide, according to Nintendo.

Other videogame makers including US titan Electronic Arts and France-based Ubisoft have crafted workout titles of their own for Wii consoles and Nintendo will soon release an enhanced "Wii Fit Plus" videogame.

"It's been refreshing and motivating to be recognized for getting people off the couch and getting some exercise," EA sports president Peter Moore said while showing off new titles at E3.

Analysts point out that exercise videogames aren't the only titles getting players moving.

Ubisoft's "Red Steel" franchise that launched with the Wii is a pioneer on a growing list of videogames that use the consoles' wand-shaped motion-sensing remote controls for swordplay.

Videogame software lets players act out soccer, tennis, basketball, canoeing, and other sports.

Konami has had people dancing with a "Dance Dance Revolution" (DDR) franchise that went from arcades to home videogame consoles.

A DDR version about to be released uses Wii balance boards and wands to track players' movements to determine how well they are performing to music.

"We are confident we will blow your mind," DDR producer Naoki Maeda said before stepping onto a balance board and gyrating his hips for a perfect score in a part of the new DDR akin to a music cardio-workout class at a gym.

"You'll really feel it in your waist."

Nintendo rivals Microsoft and Sony both revealed at E3 that they are working on motion-sensing controllers for their videogame consoles.

A Project Natal prototype for Xbox 360 raised the hopes of gamers and analysts because it combines cameras and face and voice recognition software to let players control game play with natural body movements.

E3 debuts included an Xbox 360 controller fashioned like a skateboard without wheels for a new "Tony Hawk Ride" videogame that lets players virtually take part in the sport.

"I think this will deliver new physical gaming on Xbox 360," renowned skateboarder Hawk said while showing off a controller.

Sports, fitness, and swordplay videogames let people try risky new endeavors without having to suffer consequences common to learning, or failing at, such activities, said Interpret vice president of videogame research Michael Cai.

"Fitness can be designed for a lot of active games," said Cai.

"The only concern is whether, like health club memberships or treadmills, people will buy them and forget about them."