

Gamers get a new handle on controllers

by Jonathan Sidener

The video game controller is dead. Long live the video game controller.

Sherrie Baker blasted enemy soldiers recently in the Los Angeles Convention Center using a white plastic gizmo that was shaped like a rifle and looked nothing like the stalwart gamepad that's been around since the early Atari systems.

"It's great," Baker said of the \$19 controller that converted the two-piece Nintendo Wii Remote joystick into a single, gunlike device, allowing her to more naturally target enemies and defuse land mines. "It's an inexpensive device that brings the experience of arcade games into your home."

The Zapper was one of several innovative controllers that game fans were lining up to try on the first day of the recent annual E4 video game expo. Judging by the reaction of Baker and other devotees at E4 - officially known as the Entertainment for All Expo - innovative controllers will be must-have gaming accessories for the holiday season.

The Consumer Electronics Association expects game systems to be the top-selling holiday gift category. Shoppers are expected to spend an estimated \$48 billion on game hardware in the fourth quarter of 2007, according to the association, up 7 percent over the same period last year.

"Controllers are part of it," said In-Stat video game analyst Brian O'Rourke of Scottsdale, Ariz. "People won't pay money just for an innovative controller, but if you have a good software title and the controller enhances that game, they will."

Adding alternative controllers can bump the price of a game to more than \$100, so they have to add value to sell, O'Rourke said.

"It really speaks to the resiliency of video games that people will pay extra to get this stuff," he said.

Manufacturers, aware that new controllers can be catalysts for sales, are timing several new releases in time for the holidays.

Nintendo's Zapper, which functions as a crossbow or gun depending on the game, is scheduled to go on sale soon.

So is "Guitar Hero III," the latest installment in the wildly popular series from Red Octane (\$89-\$99) that lets would-be pop stars rock out with plastic guitars.

Ramon Guevara of Los Angeles, who has "Guitar Hero II," was eager to try the next version at E4. Playing on a replica guitar makes all the difference, he said.

"I can hold the guitar up like this and earn rock-star points and make the crowd go wild," Guevara said while holding an imaginary guitar upright in front of his body. "It puts me in the game more."

Although Guevara and other "Guitar Hero" owners won't need new controllers to play the next installment, fantasy rockers who want to go to the next level can now buy a whole ensemble.

"Rock Band" from Harmonix Music Systems (\$169) - to be released soon - comes with replicas of guitar, bass, drums and microphone. As in "Guitar Hero," virtual musicians follow on-screen instructions to hit designated "fret" buttons or drum heads in time to the music. For singers to score points, they have to sing the right words, on pitch, in time to the song.

Tom Edwards, a video game consultant and "Guitar Hero" fan from Renton, Wash., found the chance to play in a four-piece band was contagious. He said he will buy "Rock Band."

"My wife and I play 'Guitar Hero' against each other," Edwards said. "I love it, so I thought I'd stand in line to try this," he said after a stint on stage playing with three others.

Edwards said alternative game controllers seem to be the wave of the future.

"Why not?" he said. "We've been stuck with typical controllers for so long."

The only downside he sees to games such as "Rock Band" is that they target a narrow band of musical tastes.

"I don't listen to that much rock," Edwards said. "I play the bagpipes. I'd like to see a 'Bagpipe Heroes,'" he joked.

E4 filled the void left when the Electronic Entertainment Expo, or E3, downsized this year. E3 was for gaming industry insiders, analysts and the media.

Thousands of video game fans were expected to attend E4. Nintendo, which makes the Wii game console, is this year's largest exhibitor. PlayStation 3-maker Sony and Xbox 360-manufacturer Microsoft were not in attendance.

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