Wii Remote may cause classic game controller to lose its grip

by Jonathan Sidener

In the beginning, or shortly thereafter, there was the game pad. With its directional control, or D-pad, on one side and buttons on the other, the game pad has ruled the video game console since the 1983 Nintendo Entertainment System.

Sure, there have been upstarts: the Nintendo Zapper light gun for "Duck Hunt" and other NES games, steering wheels for racing games and a microphone for voice command in games such as "Socom: U.S. Navy Seals." But for two decades, none threatened the supremacy of the game pad.

Even before November, when Nintendo shook things up with its motion-sensing controller for the Wii, there were signs, though, that the classic game controller could be losing its grip:

- Popular arcade game "Dance Dance Revolution" came to the game console in 2001, bringing its dance pad controller into homes. Publisher Konami has sold more than 4 million copies of the game, in which players stomp a pressure-sensitive floor pad in time to dance steps displayed on-screen.

- Sony had success with its Eye Toy accessory for the PlayStation 2, which uses a camera and gesture-recognition software to let players appear on-screen and control action with arm and leg movements. Sony is including Eye Toy games in the PlayStation 3 and says the more powerful processor will enhance the gesture recognition.

- RedOctane's "Guitar Hero" surprised the gaming world when it strummed its way onto NPD Group's top-seller list with a plastic guitar-shaped controller. The sequel, "Guitar Hero II," made the list again last year, reaching No. 2 in December, despite the extra $30 for the controller that came bundled with the game.

No one expects the game pad to become obsolete in the foreseeable future. Many longtime game players like

the comfortable controller. But the success of the "Guitar Hero" games shows that millions of PlayStation 2 owners were willing to make room for an alternative.

CONTROL SHIFT - A growing number of alternative controllers are displacing the traditional game pad. Clockwise from bottom right: 'Guitar Hero' guitar, Nintendo Wii Nunchuk and Remote, 'Xavix Tennis' racket, 'Donkey Konga' bongos and PlayStation 2 Eye Toy camera (atop the bongos). CNS Photo by Scott Linnett.Sales of the Wii suggest that Nintendo was on target with its strategy of using an alternate controller to market its system to people who never played video games before.

Using a combination of infrared sensing and accelerometers - chips that detect movements of the Wii Remote - the controller can be swung like a bowling ball, sword or golf club. It can be held and turned back and forth like a steering wheel for driving games. It also means the controller can be aimed like a gun at targets on the screen.

Nearly three months after its release, retailers are selling the Wii as fast as they can put the consoles on shelves.

To Dave Laux, IBM's global executive for games and interactive entertainment, it seems likely that a generation of alternative controllers will follow the Wii Remote. But it will be the result of advances in hardware - and falling prices - as much as anything.

"If you look at the traditional game pad, it's a bunch of fairly simple devices," Laux said. "But if you look at the Wii, because of the falling price of chips and decrease in power consumption, they were able to put intelligence in the controller itself."

In addition to smarter controllers, powerful game consoles such as the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 will be able to make controllers seem more intelligent, he said.

Laux remembers playing a voice-controlled game on his Commodore 64, a 1980s PC. There were only a few commands in the system's vocabulary, and they didn't control the game in an enjoyable way, he said.

Without sufficient processing power, speech recognition takes time - or lag - something that's unacceptable in the quick-twitch world of gaming, Laux said.

"If you look at the PlayStation 3, with its multiple processors, you could use one of those as a dedicated speech recognition processor for a game," he said. "Then maybe you could have a voice interface that wouldn't be monotonous and wouldn't make you crack into a wall by the time it figured out that you said to turn right."

Laux thinks consumers will demand new controllers from manufacturers, but not because they want new hardware. They want new gaming experiences.

"Consumers want the gaming aspects. Content is king," he said. "In many ways, that was the problem with the Eye Toy. Too often it was used to control the existing generation of games, instead of introducing a new generation."

Tina Blaine, a faculty member at Carnegie Mellon University's Entertainment Technology Center, says the success of "Guitar Hero" and the Wii marks a milestone of sorts for mainstream gaming.

"It's definitely a sign that things are changing," Blaine said.

Video game companies rarely take risks, so the success of products built around two unconventional controllers is a big deal, she said.

"It confirms that people are looking for new types of experiences," Blaine said.

Blaine, a musician, is the designer of the Jam-O-Drum, a collaborative percussion table that is part musical instrument, part video game and part light show. One Jam-O-Drum designed for six to 12 players is on permanent exhibit at the Experience Music Project interactive museum in Seattle.

While the Jam-O-Drum is not a mainstream gaming device, it has one trait in common with many of the alternative controllers that are: they merge music with games.

"Dance Dance Revolution," "Guitar Hero" and Nintendo's "Donkey Konga" - featuring a bongo-drum-styled controller - are all rhythm-action games, she said. Players are required to keep time to the games' music to score points.

"You feel like you are playing music, but you're earning points to win a game," Blaine said. "I know someone who spent so much time mastering 'Guitar Hero' that he said he was going to learn to really play the guitar."

All of the alternative controllers provide a more immersive experience than pressing buttons on a game pad, she said. Future controllers probably will build on the Wii's ability to control a game using intuitive, lifelike motions, Blaine said.

"You're not encumbered," she said. "You play with motions. I think in the future you're going to see players get less and less encumbered."

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