

Click up your heels

The new wave of motion-sensing game technology has players on their feet. **Vivian Chen** and **Ben Sin** rise to the challenge

Video games are for couch potatoes, right? That notion became moot four years ago after Nintendo introduced the Wii, a system where gamers perform various body movements holding motion-sensing controllers. By 2008, the company was touting the Wii as an exercise experience through the upgraded *Wii Fit Plus* programs.

"I wouldn't say these games can replace going to the gym, but they get the heart rate going," says Ray Wong Chi-wah, a personal trainer. Motion-sensor games take physical control to a new level. In baseball games, players swing their arms as if they were holding a bat; with boxing games, they throw punches as if they were heavyweight champions.

The exercise potential is proving to be a major draw. *Wii Sports* and *Fit* have respectively sold 67 and 22 million copies worldwide, and this year rival gamemakers at Sony and Microsoft jumped on the bandwagon with motion-sensor add-ons for their respective Playstation and Xbox games consoles. With three action platforms now on the market, we decided to put them to the test.

Nintendo Wii
Ben: "Do I punch him or the TV screen?" Vivian asks seconds before the bell rings for our boxing match. Luckily for me, the Nintendo representative tells her to jab at the TV screen. We're playing *Sports Resort* and despite its age—one year is an eternity in the video-game world—the collection of games, such as boxing, bowling, tennis, and golf, is still fun.

The movements required for *Sports Resort* are child's play compared to the newer *Wii Fit Plus* program, which comes with a device called the Wii Balance Board, a plastic slab with an area the size of an A3 piece of paper.

This serves as the base for a range of activities, such as snowboarding, spinning a hula-hoop or yoga stretches. It works by tracking your centre of gravity as you perform movements on the board, and does a surprisingly effective job of ensuring you perform the action exactly right to get a passing grade. For one yoga posture, for example, I had to stand on one leg while leaning my upper body almost 45 degrees to the side.

New this year for Nintendo is *Super Mario Galaxy 2*, the latest

instalment in its *Mario Brothers* franchise. Although this game doesn't require as much physical motion as *Sports Resort* or *Wii Fit Plus*, players still have to twirl their controllers to pull off certain moves. **Vivian:** The platform targets users from age three to 80, so most games are family-friendly. In the classic *Mario Brothers* series, for instance, the most violent segment would probably be Mario stepping on mushrooms. I especially like the co-op mode in the new *Super Mario Brothers* where players can help each other to win.

The Wii Balance Board is my favourite accessory. It comes with 69 games, including yoga and strength training. Yoga poses are limited by the size of the board. During your workout the board monitors the accuracy of your moves. It also keeps track of your weight, BMI and the calories burned each time you play. The instructions are easy to pick up and not at all intimidating. My enthusiastic mother almost put the controller through the television screen the last time she tried bowling.

Sony Move
Ben: Launched in September, the Move is Sony's attempt to make a more sophisticated motion-sensor controller. In an archery contest, which is part of the *Sports Champions* game, we do our best impression of an Olympic competitor. Sony has done a wonderful job recreating the physical moments of the sport— you really have to line up your hands, pull back with the right, aim and release.

After the arm workout, we test our vocal chords and dance moves with *SingStar Dance*, a game that requires one player to sing while another dances. Holding a controller

— which tracks the body's movement — Vivian did her best Lady GaGa dance moves while I belted out the chorus to *Poker Face* through a microphone that comes with the game. The vocal detection function — which helps singers hit the correct notes — can be adjusted to different skill levels, so whether you sing like Aretha Franklin or William Hung, you should be able to pass with ease. **Vivian:** The coolest function of the Move is its live camera. Like it or not, it will capture your movements and record your voice during play. It may sound like a useless function but it's a lot of fun seeing yourself in the game. The free pose mode in *SingStar Dance*, for example, allows you to see replays of your dancing. It's perfect for aspiring dancers, pure narcissists or friends who just want to trash your awkward Gaga moves.

The Move controller looks like a massage stick with a flashing bulb that changes colour, but I like the feel of it. Although the Move controllers are wireless, you still have to connect them to the machine every time you add a new player. Up to four controllers can be used at the same time.

Sports Champions follows movements more realistically than the other games but it offers fewer variations, including golf, volleyball and archery. The instructions can be a bit confusing for a first-timer like me. I couldn't get to grips with the archery but Ben picked it up pretty quickly. And of course, those moments of triumph are captured by the camera and can be uploaded to Facebook.

Microsoft Kinect
Ben: Instead of motion sensor controllers, this platform relies on a webcam-style peripheral placed in front of the television that records the motion of 48 different body



points. The resulting experience is more involved — and more tiring.

Like *Wii Sports* and *Sports Champions*, *Kinect Sports* features a series of sports games collected on one disc. Because there are full-body sensors, gamers must really run and jump when they play *Track and Field* (part of *Kinect Sports*). In a nice twist, the bowling game is played from a first-person point of view, giving an advantage to real bowlers who know the proper angles and when to spin the ball.

Perhaps targeting women and children, *Kinectimals* is a simulation game in which players are given the daunting task of caring for a tiger cub. On one of the levels, we have to teach our cub how to play dead. Like young children, the cub responds best to actions rather than words, so we get on our backs to show our digitalised cub how it is done.

Dancing with the Kinect requires more effort, too, as we have to spin and lift our feet to pull off the required moves. Of course, dancing to Lady GaGa — again — makes our task that much more challenging.

Vivian: The controller-free play didn't appeal at first, but the game gave me a great workout. My arm was hurting the day after

playing a few rounds of boxing games. Your body movements are captured and reflected by the avatar in the game.

Kinect's three cameras can pick up your movements and real-time colour. In its *Dance Central* game, the sensor captures our moves but hard-core players may find the choreography too easy.

It was tough to pick up at first because it's different from any other experience. You need to wave your arms to navigate the menus instead of using a controller.

But Kinect allows for more possibilities in action sensor games. The cameras make the games more interactive. In the driving game, *Kinect Joy Ride*, any colours that the cameras pick up from the surroundings will be painted on your car.

Verdict
Ben: The Kinect seems to provide the most fun for casual gamers simply because its controller-free, full-body motion sensor offers a huge variety of possibilities. Third-party game developers have taken note of this; as a result the Kinect has more games in development now than its competitors. But the Move offers greater accuracy and better tactile feedback since players are holding the controller. Sony's hardware is also the most powerful, offering the best graphics and sound.

Vivian: The Move has very impressive graphics and the quality is almost to Blu-ray standards. Then there is the added bonus of getting your image captured in the games. It boosts the fun factor in party games as well.

The Kinect offers a completely different experience from other motion-sensor games, and shows how interactive gameplay can be.

Wii may seem a bit dated compared to Kinect and Move's fancy graphics and powerful new functions, but sometimes it's the simplest and silliest games that keep you hooked for the longest time.



Vivian and Ben try their hand at dancing using Microsoft Kinect on Xbox (top); a spot of archery on PlayStation3's Move Sports Champions game (left) and getting to grips with Nintendo's Wii game console (above). Photos: Nora Tam, Reuters

Game if you are: the latest action stations

Console: Nintendo
Platform: Wii
Games/activities: *Sports Resort* offers a range of activities such as table tennis, golf, bowling, and even canoeing, jet skiing and stunt flying. With the Balance Board users can use the *Wii Fit Plus* program which includes strength-training and yoga exercises as well as juggling, skateboarding and running. Those who enjoy shaking things up a little can try the *Rhythm Kungfu* routine. Up to eight people can take turns to challenge each other on the Balance Board, which, among other things, features a calorie counter.
Price: console, HK\$1,799; Balance Board (bundled with *Wii Fit Plus* program), HK\$799

Console: Xbox 360 4GB
Platform: Kinect
Games/activities: With three built-in cameras that track the user's whole body, it gives freer, more realistic play. For instance, you can move like a pro by following the easy on-screen steps in *Dance Central*. With the *Kinectimals* game, players can stroke the virtual tiger cub without being limited by controllers. With 13 Kinect games

available in Hong Kong, there's a fair range of activities to choose from. The *Kinect Joy Ride*, for instance, is a driving game that lets players perform stunts without a controller. Its sports function offers volleyball, soccer, boxing, bowling, ping-pong and track and field events such as sprinting and high jump.
Price: Xbox 360 console with Kinect, HK\$2,499; Kinect without console, HK\$1,169

Console: Playstation3 320GB
Platform: Move
Games/activities: The Move controller works especially well with games such as *Start the Party*, where it can be used as a paintbrush, a hammer or a net to catch bugs. Sports options are similar to Wii — there are various racket games, golf and archery — but with more realistic, high-definition graphics. Karaoke games such as *SingStar Dance* come with a microphone add-on that recognises the user's voice. Up to four players can enjoy the activities together. A camera captures images of gamers at play, which can then be shared on social network sites.
Price: Playstation3 console, HK\$2,549; Move, HK\$339

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