



The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please [click here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit [www.nytreprints.com](http://www.nytreprints.com) for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#) »



November 4, 2010  
VIDEO GAME REVIEW

## A Home System Leaves Hand Controls in the Dust

By [SETH SCHIESEL](#)

I had just started trying [Microsoft's](#) new Kinect system for the Xbox 360 the other day when my friend Lee knocked on my front door.

Inviting him in, all I said was, "Welcome to the future."

Thirty seconds later we were on my couch, sitting across the living room from my television with the sleek black Kinect sensor perched unobtrusively beneath the screen.

"Check this out," I told him, then commanded, "Xbox, [ESPN](#)."

The screen responded, "Launching ESPN..." before blooming into a live broadcast of a tennis tournament in Switzerland. "Xbox," I said again, and the bottom of the screen displayed a menu including the options "Live Events," "On Demand Events" and "Highlights."

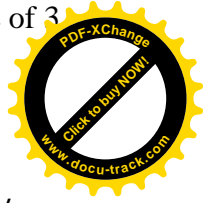
"Highlights." An incredulous grin began to fight its way across his face.

A menu of basketball, football and baseball recaps appeared. "Video 2," I said, and there was Tim Lincecum of the San Francisco Giants talking about the World Series. "Xbox, fast forward," I decreed, and the video became a blur. "Faster," I said, and the pace accelerated to four times real speed. I urged it on, saying again, "Faster," bringing up a little "8x" icon.

Suddenly I barked, "Play," and the picture immediately snapped into perfectly synced focus as the interview continued. Lee, a tech-savvy 20-something who is rarely impressed by my various electronic wonders, turned to me and said his first words since sitting down perhaps three minutes earlier, "Are you kidding me?"

Kinect is clearly the most exciting, most important leap forward for interactive home entertainment since Nintendo introduced the Wii four years ago. Nothing since the Wii, certainly not [Sony's](#) imitative Move system for the PlayStation 3, approaches the ambition and technical achievement of Kinect in potentially reshaping the mass home media experience.

Seven hours later we had fired up some rocking [Phish](#) tracks from Microsoft's Zune online service. We had played soccer by actually standing up and kicking and had played beach



volleyball by actually digging, setting, jumping and spiking in Kinect Sports. We had boogied down to [Lady Gaga](#)'s "Poker Face" and "Don't Sweat the Technique" by Eric B. & Rakim in MTV Games' Dance Central. We had ridden ultrafast futuristic skateboards in Sega's Sonic Free Riders. We had plugged virtual leaks (more fun than it sounds) and had navigated river rafts through the rapids in Kinect Adventures.

It was only then that we realized we had not touched any buttons or actually held any sort of remote control or electronic device all day; my traditional Xbox controller, festooned with 17 different buttons, triggers and sticks, sat dormant on the coffee table. We had done everything by either speaking to the system, waving an arm or actually moving our bodies in front of the screen. The Wii brought console gaming back into the mainstream by creating a controller that you could just move around. Kinect is bringing console gaming into the future by doing away with the controller altogether. Nope, not kidding.

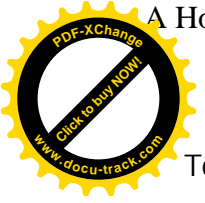
The system has limitations, but Kinect is truly inspiring because it is easy to see that Microsoft is only beginning to take advantage of what this system can do. With Kinect, Microsoft has packaged the fruits of many years and many hundreds of millions of dollars (if not more) of research and investment into a product that may finally get the company into the millions of living rooms it has been craving for so long.

And that is the big picture, so to speak. Over the years Microsoft has spent untold fortunes trying to make the leap from a computer software company to a mass consumer entertainment company. Home media server and television set-top box initiatives have come and gone and none have made Microsoft a living-room fixture. (In fairness, Microsoft's rival [Apple](#) has not had significant success there either.)

With Kinect, Microsoft is finally getting it right. And that is because Kinect, while it incorporates ridiculously advanced technology and software, is not about technology or software. It is about delivering an immediately accessible and understandable new way of having fun at home, one that no other company or system can even dream of providing.

As I threw a virtual ball with my real arm to my black panther cub running around a forest glade on the screen in Kinectimals, I had the same thought as when the system tracked my entire body so I could master a [yoga](#) pose in Your Shape: Fitness Evolved by Ubisoft.

What kept echoing in my mind was the famous dictum of the author [Arthur C. Clarke](#), "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." Most of the time Kinect simply feels like magic. You stand in front of the screen with this footlong black sensor bar glinting at you from beneath or above your TV, and the thing can tell where you are and what you are doing. More often than not it can even tell who you are; using facial recognition it can automatically sign you into your Xbox Live profile.



To navigate menus with Kinect, just wave your arm, even if you are sitting. Leave your hand-controlled pointer on a menu item for a few seconds, and it opens. Or simply talk to the system, not by yelling but with the direction and volume you might use for a dog.

Does the system recognize every voice command exactly the first time? Of course not. But it works consistently enough that I never wanted to reach for those relics of the past: a plastic controller or remote control. One potential issue is that the system does require a fair amount of space to operate properly; you're going to want to stand about eight feet from the screen, and while that shouldn't be a problem in suburban homes, this is not going to work effectively in dorm rooms or cramped studios. Another nit: Kinect controls don't work when playing normal DVDs. A more far-reaching deficiency is the absence of any 3-D games for Kinect, though I'm sure Microsoft is working on that.

But over all the Kinect experience is so captivating that I found myself looking at my other electronics with scorn. I don't want to have to remember channel numbers. Why can't I just say, "DirecTV, CNN" or "DirecTV, Fox," and have that work? Why can't I just say, "Stereo, radio," or "Stereo, [iPod](#)"?

I suspect that one day you will. But with Kinect on Xbox 360, one day is now.

---

[Copyright 2010 The New York Times Company](#) | [Home](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Back to Top](#)