

Black and White: Attending the Games Convention 2007

Ralf Stockmann

Since the sneaky death of the E3 Entertainment Expo, the “Games Convention (GC)” established itself as the international gaming industry’s leading fair. 185.000 visitors - amongst them 3.300 journalists and 503 exhibitors - populated the crowded halls in Leipzig, Germany.

But when it comes to innovation and evolution, the GC 2007 falls short. Thus, my answer on “how is the GC this year?” is “Just like last year. Played *Table Tennis*. Played *Crysis*. Waited for *Spore*. Maybe the GC is not *exactly* like last years – it is whiter”.

The GC 07 does not encourage my faith in the video game industry. Instead, it was simply another year of waiting for the big titles: *Crysis* [1] much awaited successor of the both critics and players acclaimed *Far Cry* [2], is still in manufacturing. The single player demo looked breathtakingly good and played smooth and intense. So did the multiplayer demo one year ago. One has to raise the question what kind of progress has been made to justify this lack of scheduling. The situation gets only worse concerning *Spore* [3], probably the most awaited game recently: there was no demo at all. The so called “Spore creature editor” with its unique, bizarre possibilities of creating complex live forms out of nothing was the unchallenged highlight of the GC 06. There was no editor available this year, literally there was nothing available, and when I asked the staff at Electronic Arts (EA), they barely recognized the title of their forthcoming flagship. A tiny video fragment in the EA advertising trailer on TV was the only sign of live – embarrassing. Rumor has it; the official timeline for the release has been adjusted to summer 2008.

Speaking of painful impressions: the staff of Take 2 had some hard times with their high-end, hard-to-control equipment. Quite obviously, it takes more than sleek salesmen and presenters to get a video cassette recorder running. Thus: no trailer for *Mafia 2*. The rivals are attentive: the *Grand Theft Auto 4* video did run, actually, but showed nothing more than the already known trailers on Rockstar’s website [4]. Nevertheless, the re-modeling of New York looks promising, to say the least. Rockstar’s decision to leave the playground and enter real life environments is a more than welcome decision. We have all seen the 3D model of New York in Google Earth [5], and yes we want it interactive and playable. If Rockstar delivers, it is going

to be an important step forward for an “authentic” gaming experience. Like its predecessors, *GTA 4* will be published first on consoles.

The dominance of consoles in general becomes evident, even at a convention held in a PC-friendly country like Germany. Nevertheless, the actual games for the “next generation” devices, the XBOX 360 (Microsoft) and Playstation 3 (SONY) should be considered “mostly harmless”. Nice graphics, lack of surprise. Retelling the well known stories of arcade racing, hack’n’slash and jump’n’run becomes more and more boring. Yet another racing game – yawn. As for the graphics of the new consoles, compare ANY of their newest titles with *Crysis*. Your console will feel oh-so last year.

It was up to Nintendo to deliver fun, innovation, and surprise - and the company didn't limit those things to its games. This is where “white” comes into play. They did look a little bit weird - these futuristic fun-nurses of Wii in their bright white uniforms. At least they were allowed to wear *something*, a comfort not given to many of the so called “booth babes” nowadays. And there were many of them! On almost every corner they fiercely waived their arms, holding the iconic Wii gamepads. Nintendo once again hit the mark with a sort of “back to basics” approach: simple graphics, less strategy, and more physical engagement. While there have been other attempts to extend the possibilities for what game controllers might be beyond joysticks, gamepads, and keyboard/mouse combinations, until the new Wii controllers, only steering wheels have had any sort of success. The Wii movement sensors have moved beyond this, allowing a new form of interaction that is flexible and suited to a wide variety of games. Holding the controllers, you realize that while it isn't simple, it also isn't so complex that the fun is lost. There is a learning curve, but not a steep one and that's encouraging. Most importantly, it is quick and easy fun to mimic smashing a boxing glove into the face of an opponent who is both virtual and breathing heavily right beside you. Rockstar's *Table Tennis* for the Wii takes advantage of this, and is as much fun as the version released for more standard controllers last year.

So if there is a trend to the not-so-inspired GC 07, it is a blurring the boundary between digital game and physical action. Cameras are showing up, either integrating the player himself into digital gameplay or expanding a real world table game into an upgraded digital one. This might lead to some new gameplay approaches – besides the boring mainstream path of just raising detail and resolution of already known games.

And Nintendo will continue to push the envelope. In 2008, we will see a sensory stepping device for the Wii, mimicking a bathroom scale. This diaphoretic balancing board will be bundled with a workout-game-suite, consisting of lessons in gymnastics, step aerobics and yoga – all assisted by your virtual character, doing exactly what you do on the stepper [\[6\]](#). Hands down, this is a no brainer for my wife if she ever hears about it.

References

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