

Kinect Four: The Four Games That Will Make or Break Kinect (Published in X-One Magazine)

Months since its release, Kinect lies in desperate need of must-have games to bring Microsoft's vision of motion controlled gaming to fruition. Enter the four critical Kinect games of 2014, the games that will determine the future of motion controlled gaming on Xbox One.

When Microsoft decided to focus the bulk of the Xbox One's marketing on Kinect, they forced their own hand: Either Kinect would become the next big thing, or Microsoft would fail to live up to gamers' expectations. The first round of Kinect games for Xbox One failed to deliver the essential gaming experience Microsoft promised, with a limited catalogue of games ranging from the woefully inadequate *Fighter Within* to the decent but all too familiar *Just Dance 2014*. While games like *Zoo Tycoon*, *Dead Rising 3* and *Ryse: Son of Rome* include some excellent use of Kinect controls, as principally gamepad-based games they are hardly adequate to justify Microsoft's forced inclusion of Kinect with every Xbox One. Kinect has been marred by a lack of developer support, a lack of support which looks set to continue.

Even games that would logically be expected to feature Kinect controls are being confirmed as gamepad-only. *Titanfall* lacks Kinect controls despite being an Xbox One exclusive game and therefore expected to make the most of the console's features. Capybara Games' *Below*, once referred to as a Kinect game in a press release from the developer, is now confirmed to have no Kinect functionality whatsoever. *Fable Legends*, according to Lionhead Studio's official forum, "May use Kinect where it's fun and appropriate, but does not use Kinect's motion controls for main gameplay," despite the fact that Lionhead Studios was one of the few developers to take a chance on the original Kinect with 2012's *Fable: The Journey*. Developers are clearly reluctant to commit to Kinect, and their noncommittal is translating to a lack of quality Kinect games.

In explaining the shortage of high quality Kinect games, Danny Isaac, Executive Producer on *Kinect Sports Rivals*, says, "Developing motion titles is a unique challenge; only a few studios in the world are able to do it well. Plus, not every genre needs full motion control." This, however, is no reassurance to gamers who bought an Xbox One in the hope of enjoying excellent motion controlled games. The question remains; where exactly are the must-have Kinect games going to come from? "There are whole new areas of gaming, maybe even whole new genres, that can be unlocked via Kinect," Isaac assures. A look at the list of upcoming Kinect games seems to confirm Isaac's opinion. Over the course of the next year four major Kinect titles will be released, all of which are strikingly "New" and have the potential to deliver the essential Kinect experience.

The first, and perhaps most important of all upcoming Kinect games, is *Kinect Sports Rivals*, Rare's successor to the Xbox 360's *Kinect Sports* franchise, originally intended to launch with the Xbox One.

Being a showpiece for Kinect, *Kinect Sports Rivals* has been specifically designed to showcase the power of the system. "The way we approached the game was to look at how each sport can push the sensor in different ways," says Isaac. "Wake Racing uses the ability to detect an open or closed hand to control the throttle, while full body motions [steer the jet-ski]. Rock Climbing uses hand tracking but also allows players to stretch and jump to climb faster. Target Shooting uses finer movements with great accuracy, while Tennis looks at specific movements to hit different types of shots."

Perhaps the most impressive element of *Kinect Sports Rivals* is the "Champions Scan," which allows a player to scan their face into the game to create their own "Kinect Sports Champion." This

“Champion” doesn’t only look like the player, but actively learns the player’s play style and competes on the player’s behalf when they are not around.

Through its multifaceted use of Kinect’s technology, Rare are confident *Kinect Sports Rivals* will illustrate why the system is so important. “The new sensor allowed us to create experiences that simply weren’t possible before,” says Isaac, “from highly complex features such as our ‘Champion Scan’ technology, to the simple but powerful motion controls, to voice control.” Rare are optimistic that *Kinect Sports Rivals* will impress not just gamers, but fellow developers too. As Isaac states, “I’m hoping *Kinect Sports Rivals* will [encourage more developers to create Kinect games].” Perhaps this is why so much of *Kinect Sports Rivals*’ design seems custom built to fit into other gaming genres. The principles of *Kinect Sports Rivals*’ target shooting, for instance, may reveal how Kinect can be used in first-person-shooters, while events like Soccer and Tennis could form the foundations of fully fledged sports games. With these events, Rare are able to illustrate Kinect’s potential in various genres, perhaps encouraging other developers to begin creating their own Kinect-exclusive games.

Microsoft are trusting Rare, as second-party developers, with the responsibility of proving the validity of Kinect not just to gamers but to other developers. Yet Rare are not alone in this mission. They are joined by several powerful allies, perhaps the most important of which is Harmonix, creator of *Guitar Hero*, *Rock Band* and *Dance Central*. Master of both rhythm games and motion control games, Harmonix is perfectly positioned to work magic with Kinect. With the upcoming *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved*, Harmonix appear to have the recipe for another bestseller.

“*Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved* is a musical performance game that challenges players to move in sync with songs,” says Jonathan Mintz, a designer on *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved*. “The game turns performing and remixing music into a social experience. You can remix a song, solo or with a friend, and then let somebody else see how different they can make it sound.” Where Harmonix’s previous developments adapted the fundamentals of music to create games—creating a controller out of a toy guitar for *Rock Band*, for instance—*Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved* approaches music in an entirely new way. “As you progress in the game, you’ll discover spells that let you physically shape sounds with your hands. It’s like finger-painting a keyboard riff, or sculpting a guitar tone with a potter’s wheel,” says Mintz. “You have the chance to physically explore realms made of music. This opens up cool new interactions, like standing in front of a school of fish and touching them to make them sing.” It’s a completely new approach to the music genre and, as Mintz states, “It wouldn’t be possible without Kinect.”

It’s hard to imagine *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved* becoming anything other than a bestseller. Take Harmonix’s track record, add the Disney label, and toss in such music as Avicii’s “Levels,” Bruno Mars’s “Locked out of Heaven,” Fun’s “Some Nights” and Kimbra’s “Settle Down” and you’ve got the recipe for the perfect game to sell Kinect to casual gamers. *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved* and *Kinect Sports Rivals* are certain to thrill casual gaming audiences, but even if they should somehow fail to deliver, casual gamers will still be able to look forward to one of the most unique titles of the year: Team Dakota’s *Project Spark*.

Similar to *Minecraft* and *LittleBigPlanet*, *Project Spark* is a game creation title but with a twist: it utilises Smartglass, Kinect and traditional gamepad to make content creation easier and quicker than ever before. To create their game, players paint geographical features like rock faces and add environmental conditions like snow and lightning. This allows for the creation of rich imaginary worlds, ranging from lush jungles to harsh deserts. Monsters and opponents can then be added to the game world, along with logic and controls.

Most impressive of all is *Project Spark*'s use of Kinect's motion capture device, which enables players to record motion sequences and overlay those motions onto custom character creations. One developer video shows a demonstrator creating an ogre character, then motion capturing stomping motions to animate the monster, adding facial movements and finally playing back their creation. Creations can then be shared between gamers via cloud, the intention being to create a community rich with user generated content. Team Dakota are hoping this community will swell to *Minecraft*-esque proportions. Should that happen, Kinect will certainly score a significant success, but then very few games have ever achieved the popularity of *Minecraft*.

Kinect Sports Rivals, *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved* and *Project Spark* promise much of Kinect's future, but they are not without limitation. All three titles being casual games, they leave Kinect open to attack from its fiercest critics: the hardcore gamers who believe motion controls simply cannot work with hardcore games. The criticism is not unfounded. "A hardcore Kinect game is an interesting challenge," says Mintz. "Developers are used to knowing that 'Press the X button to punch' will work 100% of the time. It's an entirely different challenge to account for the million different ways someone might move when you ask them to actually punch. It's a tall order for developers to rethink games on such a fundamental level." However, one game designer is very much up for the challenge: the ultra-creative, slightly wacky, always original Hidetaka Suehiro (A.K.A "Swery"), the man behind such wonderfully crazy games as *Spy Fiction* and *Deadly Premonition*. With his new game *D4 (Dark Dreams Don't Die)*, Hidetaka Suehiro and Access Games hope to prove Kinect to hardcore gamers.

In *D4* your mission is to prevent the death of your wife at the hands of a character known only as "D." To do this you'll travel through time by "diving into" objects that are of psychological importance to different characters. Time travelling and psychic intuition aside, it's Access Games' inventive use of Kinect that make *D4* so intriguing.

For starters, there's the "Synchro Action" pop-up, which shows players a stance that they must mimic—in one section, for instance, the player must lunge in order to make player-character David deflect an incoming baseball. Then there's "Head Vision," activated when the player holds their fingers to their head, which highlights points of interest in the environment. Hordes of different motion-activated moves like punches, kicks and sways have the player all but performing a choreographed dance routine in front of the Kinect sensor. Yet Swery still isn't content. He's determined to pull every drip of power out of Kinect. His latest announcement was that he is looking for ways to use Kinect's facial expression recognition to incorporate the player's empathy as a gameplay mechanic. Goodness knows how such a mechanic would work; it's a total mystery, but that's the point: motion control *is* a mystery; it's a new aspect of game design. Only with open minds and creative enthusiasm can developers hope to discover the true power and potential of motion controlled games.

It is their creative enthusiasm and willingness to take risks that unites Access Games with fellow Kinect developers Rare, Harmonix and Team Dakota. As Mintz says, "As a developer, your first impulse with a new platform is to try adapting what you know"—this explains the majority of early Kinect games—"but to really excel, you need to start from the strengths of your platform." This is precisely the strength behind *D4*, *Kinect Sports Rivals*, *Project Spark* and *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved*: they represent genuinely new approaches to game design. With these games, we are witnessing the true birth of motion controlled gaming on Xbox One and the realisation of Microsoft's vision. This is just the beginning. "Our incubation team already has a number of great ideas that have Kinect at their heart," says Isaac. "The second and third generation Xbox One titles will unlock unique and innovative experiences with Kinect." Mintz agrees, "[Developing for Kinect] can be

challenging, but there's a lot of potential there waiting to be unlocked." No game system, however, can survive on potential alone. Without high quality games, the life expectancy of a system is painfully short. Kinect's destiny now lies in the hands of those developers with the creative enthusiasm and talent to make it work; Microsoft's vision is at the mercy of four critical games.

BOX OUT: Kinect: It Only Does Everything

While larger game developers may be reluctant to commit fully to Kinect, indie developers and individual gamers have created truly amazing games with Microsoft's motion sensor, ranging from *Mario Kart Kinect* to *Minecraft Kinect* to *3D Tetris*. Kinect has even been adapted by doctors to help at-home stroke victims, and by South Korean Programmer Ko Jae-Kwan, who used Microsoft's motion sensing technology to create a security system that detects sound and movement over the demilitarised zone between South Korea and North Korea.

One of the most successful Kinect indie game developments so far has been *Fru*, the creation of Team Ferrara, which won both the Audience Award and Jury Award at Game Jam 2014.

"*Fru* is a puzzle platformer in which the silhouette of the player reveals a second dimension (or a parallel world) lying beneath the game's world," says Traverso. "*Fru* uses Kinect to capture the silhouette of the player and to 'carve a hole' into the top game level, revealing the second level beneath." To put it another way, it's like playing *Super Mario Bros.* while having to move your body in specific ways to reveal hidden platforms.

Fru illustrates one of the many new gaming experiences that can be created with Kinect, despite the fact that, as Traverso states, "The game was developed during a 48 hour game competition." *Fru*'s secret to success? "The strength of *Fru* is that it was designed with Kinect in mind, rather than being a classic game with a new control scheme stuck on top of it," says Traverso.

If an unfunded group of seven can develop a fun Kinect game in 48 hours, imagine what major game developers would be able to create were they to fully commit to the system.

CAPTIONS

1: *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved* is the next big game from the creators of *Rock Band*, *Guitar Hero* and *Dance Central*.

2: *Fable Legends* will allow players to use voice commands when controlling the villain, and may feature motion controls in mini-games.

3: With *Kinect Sports Rivals*, Rare hope to encourage other developers to begin making Kinect games.

4: *Project Spark* gives gamers the power to create their own games.

5: With *D4 (Dark Dreams Don't Die)*, Hidetaka Suehiro hopes to prove Kinect's importance to hardcore gaming.

6: Every event in *Kinect Sports Rivals* has been specifically created to show off a different aspect of Kinect.

