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E3 is action-packed again

The video game expo roars back into Los Angeles after two low-key years. Buzz surrounds *God of War III*, *DJ Hero*, *The Beatles: Rock Band*, *Wii Sports Resort*, *Your Shape* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic*.



Danny Merrill focuses on a hand-held device at the Electronic Entertainment Expo, which drew more than 35,000 attendees to the Los Angeles Convention Center.

By Alex Pham and Ben Fritz
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This year, the orcs and elves returned to the City of Angels. And they brought money with them -- more than \$15 million in direct spending on taxi rides, hotel rooms, wine and sushi, among other things.

The Electronic Entertainment Expo, which was substantially scaled back in 2007 and 2008, came roaring back this week at the Los Angeles Convention Center, attracting more than 35,000 visitors. For Los Angeles, E3 was the biggest convention so far this year, said Mayor Antonio

Villaraigosa, who welcomed the conventioners Tuesday.

Some Angelenos may remember the video game confab for its over-the-top spectacles: soldiers rappelling from U.S. Army helicopters, models strutting in thongs and 6-inch heels, skateboarders sailing off half-pipes and celebrity-soaked parties that were more like three-ring circuses.

But the merriment came to a halt in 2007 when game companies decided enough was enough. The show, which hit peak attendance in

2005 with more than 65,000 attendees, was toned down in 2007 to a stately affair in Santa Monica with an invite-only guest list of about 4,000. It returned to the L.A. Convention Center last July but was so low-key that some in the industry lamented that it looked like a pipe fitters convention.

This year, the Entertainment Software Assn., the industry-funded group that puts on E3, screened the event's registration to keep out the "fanboys" -- people who like to play games but don't work in the game industry. Companies, sobered by the economic recession, spent less money on parties. But there was still enough glam to attract a sizable audience of gawkers and camera crews from major TV networks.

"What we've done is put together a show that is much more reflective of the high octane, high energy, innovation and excitement that is the video game industry," ESA President Mike Gallagher said.

Game companies are counting on that excitement to help drive sales, while consumers are looking for ways to save money.

Avid players plan to maintain their rate of spending on games, but women and older players plan to spend less, citing the bad economy, according to a survey released this week by media consulting firm Frank N. Magid Associates Inc.

Here are some of the industry's biggest blockbuster bets for release in the next several months:

* **God of War III:** Sony Corp. has only one self-owned video game series on par with giants like Halo and Grand Theft Auto, and this game is the first for its PlayStation 3 console. A big launch for the ultra-violent action game, which is set in ancient Greece, is crucial to Sony's boosting the fortunes of its third-place console. Due out in March.

* **DJ Hero:** Activision Inc.'s first spinoff from its Guitar Hero franchise, one of the biggest brands in the video game business, abandons the guitar and drums. DJ Hero is the first of the many Hero games to focus on another musical fantasy: spinning records and mixing tracks with a new turntable controller. It also comes with a bit of controversy. Activision is in a lawsuit with the maker of a competitive game, Scratch: The Ultimate DJ, which was shown at a party near E3 on Wednesday night. Due out in October.

* **The Beatles: Rock Band:** MTV Games' big music title was hyped at the opening of E3 on Monday by Beatles band members Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr, who shared the stage. The \$250 game will come with 45 Beatles songs, a guitar controller, drums, a microphone and a microphone stand. Due out Sept. 9.

* **Wii Sports Resort:** Nintendo Co. adds to the fitness genre, one of the fastest-growing categories of games. This one will include the company's Wii Motion Plus peripheral, which attaches to the Wii console's candy-bar-shaped controller

and is supposed to improve the controller's accuracy. Players can practice virtual archery, play pingpong or shoot a few basketballs. Due out in July.

* **Your Shape:** A more serious fitness title from Ubisoft Entertainment gives users customized workout routines based on their body shape. How does it know users' shape? The game comes with a camera that scans the body and gives visual cues to help players position properly during stretches and yoga poses. Just in time to combat Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas cookies, it's due out this fall.

* **Star Wars: The Old Republic:** BioWare developed and Electronic Arts Inc. and LucasArts co-published this massively multiplayer online game. To see this highly anticipated title, visitors had to enter a starship-themed lair, one of the most elaborate at E3. The game features multiple story lines and hundreds of thousands of lines of dialogue. Given its massive scope, the pedigree of its development studio and the popularity of the movies on whose fiction it expands, this might be the first title with a shot at unseating genre king World of Warcraft. When that might happen, no one knows: Old Republic doesn't yet have a release date.