

E3 console roundup: Xbox upstages Nintendo at E3, Sony does its thing

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You don't have to introduce a new game platform to create a big buzz at E3. A clever app or novel piece of software can still do the trick at the annual video gaming conference, as first Microsoft and then Sony demonstrated Monday in Los Angeles.

Multimedia Muscle Flexing: Sure, Microsoft had new mass appeal games to preview, including eternally popular first-person shooters like "Halo 4" (coming Nov. 6), a Kinect voice play-enabled "[Madden NFL 13](#)" (Aug. 28) and "South Park: The Stick of Truth," a wacky parody of gaming from the creators of the animated show, Trey Parker and Matt Stone (March 2013).

But the biggest take away was the SmartGlass application, which will offer Xboxers the chance to use their console in conjunction with Windows 8 and [Windows phone](#) devices, as well as Apple [iPads](#) and Android devices to make "movies more immersive, music more engaging, games more interactive." In that last instance, the app brings some of the same functionality to [Xbox 360](#) that Nintendo is championing with the new Wii U system formally introduced at E3. What a coincidence!

With movies, SmartGlass becomes like the "second screen" app that studios such as Disney and Warner Bros. have offered with select films, allowing you to get additional synchronized information about the production and cast on a tablet or smartphone. This happens while the program is playing on the big TV screen through an Xbox, sourced from

a growing list of content partners. (Newly on board: Nickelodeon, [Univision](#), Paramount and now most [ESPN cable channels](#).)

There also was talk of starting a movie on the second portable screen with SmartGlass then continuing it on an Xbox-connected TV, though it was unclear if the movie would be "flung" wirelessly from the SmartGlass-enabled gadget or merely synchronized between the devices, as [Netflix](#) allows. SmartGlass also will work with a new Xbox Music service claimed to offer more than 30 million songs, as well as with an Xbox-customized [Internet Explorer](#) using Kinect voice command and Bing search.

All this seems part of Microsoft's long-range master plan—at least twenty years in the making—to take over the living room. The Media Center PC concept of yore didn't pan out well, but the Trojan horse they call the Xbox 360 sure is doing the job. Microsoft recently announced that people use the console more for watching movies and TV shows than for playing games.

Sony Stays Focused: A theme of connectivity was also pushed at the Sony press conference, especially cross-gaming between the seasoned PlayStation 3 console and newly launched (and currently struggling) Vita portable system. The latter's appeal should improve with at least some of the 60 games now in development, including an amazing looking, Revolutionary War-themed "Assassin's Creed 3."

Sony also announced it's bringing the Playstation Suite of games to Android tablets and Playstation Mobile to more smartphones besides its' own brand, starting with phones from HTC.

But the bigger take away here was mostly about more sophisticated story telling in games, from the mystery of "Beyond" (its' maybe-living, maybe-dead central character voiced by actress Ellen Page) to a four

player co-op-friendly "Far Cry 3" that lets participants map their own game.

Far and away the coolest and most charming intro was the first in a series of "Wonderbook" game titles called "Book of Spells," developed with J.K. Rowling of "Harry Potter" fame. The concept is to put a physical book in your lap and Move controller in your hand with a PS3-connected Sony EyeToy camera peering down on you. Waving the Move over the book turns the controller into a magic wand (in the on-screen version of you.) Then out of those pages pop 3-D castles and fire-breathing dragons sparking all kinds of mischief, if you've conjured the spell properly.

This augmented reality gaming will not be limited just to storytelling, said Sony's Andy House, but also to "educational experiences" from traveling through the galaxy to walking with dinosaurs.

Nintendo's Next: Yes Nintendo did have more to excite us at its press conference than the already sneak-peaked news its' Wii U GamePad controller will also function as a "fully independent infrared TV remote." Wow. Also in the practical vein, did you know game discs for Wii are compatible with the Wii U? Wise move. And there's a soon-coming (probably 2013) network communication system called "Miiverse" that will encourage users to brag about Nintendo gaming accomplishments across multiple platforms including PCs and Web-enabled mobile devices.

Adding more interest, Nintendo shared that two of the fancy, screen-equipped Wii U GamePads will work on one system, though many games are being designed for "asymmetrical play" with one GamePad user playing a specific role, like a "chaser," and seeing special stuff on his dedicated tablet screen while other gamers use the older Wii remotes and gawk at the big screen TV in their roles as, say "runners."

Ostensibly as a "tool of together" (a new Nintendo mantra) some titles like WiiFit U will be playable strictly on the GamePad, so sis or mom can sit nearby enjoying something else entirely on the TV. By the way, popular video apps Netflix, Hulu Plus, YouTube and Amazon Video on Demand will stream through Wii U, just not while a game's on.

Previewed [Wii U](#) titles seem a lot more interactive and complex than the new Xbox 360 second screen solution will provide, at least for a while. "Nintendoland" will offer a dozen attractions with branded characters ("Donkey Kong's Crash Course," "Legend of Zelda Battle Quest," "Animal Quest," etc.) that demonstrate different aspects of two screen play.

Ubisoft, Nintendo's most loyal of third-party developers, announced a sizeable array of "U-niversity" schooled titles, including a most amusing "Zombi-U" that turns your camera-captured face into a horror show special and requires stunts like door lock number hacking on the GamePad.

As expected (sigh), Nintendo put no price or firm release date on its innovative game system, beyond "holiday season" availability.

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