

Microsoft stirs buzz on possible iPad challenger (Update)

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The Microsoft logo is seen at the XBOX 360 booth at the Electronic Entertainment Expo on June 7, 2011 in Los Angeles, California. Microsoft has set the tech world buzzing with a mysterious announcement Monday which sparked speculation that the software giant may be developing a product to challenge the Apple iPad.

Microsoft kept the tech world buzzing Monday ahead of a mysterious announcement which has fueled speculation the software giant may unveil a product to challenge the Apple iPad.

The venue for the invite-only announcement, shrouded in secrecy reminiscent of tech mega rival Apple's media-frenzied unveilings, was disclosed to participants only hours before the event itself.

Journalists -- who last week received an invitation teasingly telling them "This will be a major Microsoft announcement -- you will not want to

miss it" -- were told to turn up at the Milk Studios, in downtown Hollywood.

The Milk Studios website describes it as "one of the world's premiere photography studios, (which) stands at the crossroads of fashion, photography, art and media" -- although it was unclear what link it has with Microsoft.

The Hollywood location has fueled speculation that the announcement could involve entertainment industry content.

But beyond the venue there were still few concrete details of what was in store at the 3:30 pm. (2230 GMT) event, which has triggered an array of reports, some contradictory.

Last week, the entertainment website The Wrap said it had learned Microsoft would unveil its own branded tablet powered by Windows in a head-on challenge to Apple.

Technology news site TechCrunch said the announcement would not involve a device with the upcoming Microsoft 8 operating system, but a co-branded tablet with Barnes & Noble, the struggling bookseller and maker of the Nook tablet.

The device, according to TechCrunch, could allow consumers to link to the Microsoft Xbox 360 gaming console for streaming movies and other entertainment.

Microsoft in April announced a \$300 million investment in a new Barnes & Noble subsidiary which includes the Nook business.

But the business website Benzinga said Barnes & Noble indicated it was not part of the Microsoft announcement.

The brokerage firm Canaccord said "sources close to the matter" indicate Microsoft would unveil a tablet running the next version of Windows under its own brand, departing from its strategy of partnering with computer makers.

"Microsoft has been working with computer makers in the production of the tablets, looking to win share of the tablet market from the dominant iPad," the brokerage said in a note to clients.

Some others speculated Microsoft might announce a deal to buy online video service Hulu and weave it into the Xbox Live online entertainment service linked to the Redmond, Washington-based company's leading Xbox 360 videogame consoles.

The fact that the press event will be held at a yet-to-be disclosed venue in Los Angeles hinted heavily that entertainment industry content would be in the spotlight.

"It's in L.A., so they are going to talk about media," said independent Silicon Valley analyst Rob Enderle.

"It could be about hardware, but after the Kin failure and the Zune failure I can't picture the person at Microsoft who has the balls to pitch a Microsoft tablet."

Kin was a youth-oriented mobile phone from Microsoft that was pulled from the market after just weeks, while Zune was the longtime Apple rival's now-abandoned MP3 device that unsuccessfully challenged the iPod.

Some analysts were speculating about an early release of Windows RT, the Microsoft operating system to power tablets or other mobile devices running on ARM chips, which allow mobile devices to run more

efficiently.

Microsoft earlier this month stepped up its quest to be at the heart of home entertainment by syncing Xbox 360 videogame consoles to smartphones and tablets while adding more blockbuster content.

Microsoft has mixed record in hardware

Microsoft, which built its fortune by specializing in software and leaving the job of making computers or other devices to partners, has had mixed results from its hardware ventures.

The Redmond, Washington-based technology colossus has stamped its brand on personal computer keyboards, headsets, speakers, webcams and mouse controllers.

Microsoft has occasionally weighed in with more significant hardware when it appeared as though rivals are running away with the market.

The company's most successful effort in devices has been its Xbox gaming console, in contrast to failed music player known as Zune.

The Xbox videogame console by Microsoft made its debut in November of 2001 to take on Sony PlayStation systems in a battle for people's living rooms.

The current generation Xbox 360 console dominates the market. Microsoft has been building on the array of films, games, music and other digital content available in an Xbox Live online service to make the consoles home entertainment hubs.

Microsoft this month unveiled a SmartGlass application that developers can use to synch iPads or other tablet computers to Xbox 360 consoles.

Zune handheld digital media players were released in late 2006 in a Microsoft challenge to Apple's culture-changing iPod devices.

Microsoft discontinued Zune hardware last year. Microsoft continues to operate its Zune service offering online music, films and other entertainment content, weaving it into the offerings available on Internet-linked Xbox 360 videogame consoles.

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