

# Review: PlayStation 4 turns gaming into social activity

November 20 2013, by Todd Martens

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It was one hour after the West Coast's midnight launch of Sony's PlayStation 4, and there were 100 channels live-broadcasting the event.

On one, a "Call of Duty" player confessed to just randomly pushing buttons, and on another a group of college-age kids engaged in trash

talking in "NBA 2K14." Riveting stuff? Probably not to most, but arguably no console out-of-the-box has felt as laser-focused on its audience as the PS4.

New for the PS4 is a button on the controller labeled "share." Players can use it to upload video to Facebook or tap into Twitch, a popular streaming video site.

This new generation of video games may not offer the knockout graphics that once heralded a new console epoch, but the content will be televised and shared. Though communal gaming is just one feature in the PS4's tweaked and improved skill set, it serves as a tacit reminder that console innovators are entering a vastly different landscape than the one they conquered seven or eight years ago.

The attention is focused on the battle between Sony's PS4 and Microsoft's Xbox One, the latter of which is due Nov. 22. For good reason: Sony and Microsoft each sold about 80 million units of their PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, but times have changed.

Nintendo struck gold in 2006 with the Wii, which sold more than 100 million, but brand loyalty in the video game world is fickle. The 2012 Wii U has struggled despite being home to the most recognizable characters in the medium.

And the PS4 and Xbox One aren't the only new game machines - just last week Apple's iPad Mini was released. Yes, it's a game machine, especially as gamers shift from playing almost exclusively from the couch to on the go.

The highly sociable PS4 sidesteps attempts by competitors to capture a more casual player and subsume all home media options with a machine that offers no-nonsense gaming professionalism.

If it the PS4 weren't \$400, it could be seen as a love letter to Sony's core audience. Aspects of the PS3 that were clunky, such as the uninviting user interface, have been remade to follow the lead of smart TVs and the Xbox 360 to emphasize tiles and images. Once a game is installed, the system is hyper fast; I jumped from a paused game to the online store within three seconds.

Other areas received an upgrade as well, such as the PS4's controller, which possesses more robust handlebars, a small touch pad and feels less constrained. Adorably, it also has a glowing light bar that can shift colors based on game environments and a headphone jack that is handy for online players.

Even the system's parallelogram look, a part-glossy, part-matte finish interrupted by a pulsating light, is sexy and demure, a 2-inch high device that can clandestinely rest to the side or under any home TV.

There are multimedia options, such as the ability to stream music or movies from Sony's proprietary services and old standbys such as Netflix, but the PS4 wants your Facebook feed more than it wants your living room. You'll be asked to log in to the social network moments after booting up, and the default setting will broadcast to your friends your every PS4 move.

It's the gamer as online marketer, and if that's less of a neat launch tool than "Super Mario 64" back in the day, let's face it, video game consoles are not the must-have gadget that they once were.

The PS4 looks good, but so did this year's "The Last of Us" on the PS3. Though there are differences, consider it on par with the visual leap between "Toy Story" and "Brave." The latter is a refinement of a style, in which little details rather than the big picture dazzle, such as the individual strands of a character's hair or the sway of a blade of grass.

Or, here, the constantly moving flourishes that fill every inch of the screen on PlayStation 4 gunner "Killzone: Shadow Fall."

Whereas the PS4 was fast and relatively painless to hook up - the system went from out-of-the-box to operational in about 20 minutes - the system lacks must-have content, therefore an initial "wow" moment.

Of the PS4's debut titles, "Knack" is the most enticing, a title overseen by PS4 system architect Mark Cerny. It's playful and cartoonish, with a look and tone of a solid DreamWorks offering, but it's also relatively familiar in how it plays.

Followers of the PS3 know that the system's best games were not among the initial wave, and Sony cemented its deserved game-first reputation in 2013. When attention could have been focused on the PS4, Sony delivered "The Last of Us," "Beyond: Two Souls" and "Rain" for the PS3, some of the system's more innovative offerings. But that's also an argument to take a wait-and-see approach.

Sony is not alone. Nintendo is struggling to funnel content to the Wii U and the forecast for Xbox One games this season also looks splotchy, but when one is shelling out \$400 for the system, plus \$100 or \$200 more for accessories and a game or two (neither Sony's device nor Microsoft's is backward compatible), the so-called content providers shouldn't be let so easily off the hook for failing to provide content.

There are broader concerns. Though the PS4 has a large hard drive at 500 gigabytes, most of the system's major games require about 40 GBs apiece. Factor in the operating system, and you're looking at a device that can hold maybe 10 or 12 mainstream games. In a couple of years, those players who opt not to go through the trouble of replacing a hard drive may find themselves deleting and reinstalling games to manage space because the PS4 does not support external hard drives for game

storage.

A PlayStation Plus membership (\$9.99 per month or \$49.99 per year) will give players 1 GB of cloud storage for saving games. This fee is also required for any online multiplayer gaming, and the membership includes two gamers per month. Access to the titles, however, expires with the membership.

You will want to be online with your PS4. It will be required, in fact, if you intend to use your system to purchase a movie, as Sony allows only for streaming of films.

Ultimately, early adapters will be pleased. To many of the video gaming faithful, the easy recording and sharing capabilities of the PS4 will be everything, as the idea of a video game as a spectator sport is more common than many realize.

Twitch, the [video game](#) streaming site integrated into the PS4, enjoys more than 600,000 broadcasters per month, and it will also be coming to the Xbox One as well (on the latter, it will require a subscription to Xbox Live Gold).

Yet as someone who views video gaming as a solo activity, and generally finds the competitive nature of online multiplayer to be off-putting - I like to explore and fail free from the commentary and eyes of others - such recording and sharing abilities mean zilch.

Neither approach to gaming is right or wrong. More interesting is the question: Are more advanced consoles going to equal better games?

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Citation: Review: PlayStation 4 turns gaming into social activity (2013, November 20) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-11-playstation-gaming-social.html>

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