

Review: Xbox One nearly a set-top box replacement

December 4 2013, by Ryan Nakashima



In this Friday, Nov. 22, 2013, file photo, Emanuel Jumatate, from Chicago, hugs his new Xbox One after he purchased it at a Best Buy in Evanston, Ill. Microsoft is billing the Xbox One, which includes an updated Kinect motion sensor, as an all-in-one entertainment system rather than just a gaming console. (AP Photo/Nam Y. Huh)

The Xbox One won't quite replace your TV set-top box, but it comes

awfully close. The latest game console from Microsoft takes a big leap toward being the main entertainment hub in your living room. It gives you a program guide for browsing what's on TV and what's highlighted in apps such as Netflix and Amazon. You can listen to music and view photos stored on Microsoft's SkyDrive service. You can make Skype video calls.

And yeah, you can even play games.

Some of the updates to the Xbox One and Sony's PlayStation 4 help turn them into multi-function devices that make them more attractive to non-gamers. The Xbox goes further than the PlayStation, mainly because it integrates regular live TV. Slick new operating systems and voice controls on both consoles can make navigating the offerings part of the fun.

The Xbox still requires a regular TV set-top box to feed it TV signals using what's called "HDMI pass-through." And you need subscriptions for TV and streaming services. The Xbox One acts like a traffic cop and weaves it all together elegantly. It doesn't pull up on-demand shows or programs saved on a [digital video recorder](#); you have to use the traditional remote control with the Xbox still powered on to do that. But Microsoft is looking at adding that feature in a future software update.

The \$500 Xbox One comes with an updated Kinect device for motion and voice detection, while the \$400 PlayStation 4 has a voice-command camera system for the first time, sold separately for \$60. Both systems are good at facial recognition and will sign you in automatically.

The Xbox adds a few neat tricks: Using your voice, you can power it on, adjust the TV volume, find shows and channels and start photo slideshows. That's much easier than searching my couch cushions for the TV remote control, even though my wife found it odd that I kept talking

to the machine.

A nifty "snap" function that is unique to the Xbox makes it possible to do two things at once. This way, I could play "Need for Speed: Rivals" in a large window and watch the British TV show "Sherlock" on Netflix in a smaller one. I simply say to the machine, "Xbox snap Netflix," after firing up the game and the show separately. Because snap also works for TV, I found this a great way to keep tabs on a football game, listen to a talk show or see when a commercial break ended.

I did notice some quirks, though. Using snap, I found the image stuttered when the console was starting a game or doing some other intense computing. In some cases, I found the audio lagged people's lips moving, even when I went back to full-screen mode. In troubleshooting with Xbox support, I was told to restart the set-top box and console and make sure I had the highest-rated HDMI cables. That didn't resolve the issue, but the hiccup isn't a deal-breaker. When I'm doing two things, I'm not zeroing in on every detail anyway.

At this point, the PlayStation's new user interfaces are more rudimentary, but they seem capable of improving over time. The voice commands you can give it are more limited than on the Xbox, and its home screen doesn't make use of the touchpad on the new DualShock 4 controller. Its PlayRoom app shows off what's possible, like kicking imaginary robots that appear to multiply in my living room. But I got the sense that game developers have yet to take advantage of the new hardware.

Both new consoles bring music into the mix with their proprietary music subscriptions, "Music Unlimited" and "Xbox Music." Either allows you to listen to music while playing a game if you have a \$10-a-month subscription. In both cases, you'll have to fiddle with volume settings manually.

Both consoles also offer ways to buy movies and TV shows, similar to the previous generation of consoles. And both consoles play streaming video in 1080p high definition. With the One, the Xbox has caught up to the PlayStation in enabling you to watch video on Blu-ray discs.

Both systems also introduce new ways of sharing some of your game play with friends. On the Xbox, you say "Xbox record that." With the PlayStation, you press the share button to capture a good chunk of action that just happened. The PlayStation makes it much easier to post to Facebook and Twitter. Both offer ways to edit these videos. The Xbox lets you insert video commentary, while the PlayStation lets you broadcast your game play and video commentary live on the online game video app Twitch.

Although the Xbox One's ambitions are higher, it comes with a few oddities. You can't say "Xbox play game" to go back to your video game, because the "play" command is reserved for playback controls or launching the music app. You have to say "Xbox select" to light up certain words on the screen that allow you to navigate, but the choices are inconsistent. Sometimes apps have "full screen" as an option, and sometimes it's "go to full screen."

However, I think the benefits outweigh any initial frustrations.

There are reasons to buy either console, not least of which is to benefit from machinery that is more powerful than its predecessors. And neither company is done innovating. The Xbox will have a Verizon FiOS app by early next year so subscribers can pull up on-demand programming. Sony plans to add original video content from Sony Pictures exclusively for its PlayStation Network. If done regularly, it will be a long-term benefit of owning its console, though it's not yet clear whether you need to pay for a PlayStation Plus subscription for those extras.

Neither console is perfect out of the box, but both offer a range of intriguing possibilities that will definitely entertain you—at least until the next consoles come out years from now.

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