

Japan gamers finally get PS4 at midnight launch (Update 2)

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Sony Computer Entertainment Inc. President and Group CEO Andrew House (L) and Sony Computer Entertainment Japan and Asia President Hiroshi Kawano (R) pose with the first customer of Sony's PlayStation 4 video game console in Tokyo, February 22, 2014

Diehard gamers in Japan who began queuing earlier this week finally got their hands on a new PlayStation 4 as Sony unleashed its console on home turf in a midnight launch.

The long-awaited Japanese launch comes after a stellar debut in the United States and Europe, where more than 5.4 million units have been shifted since November, offering a bright ray of hope to Sony after years of gloomy sales of its key consumer electronics goods.

At midnight (1500 GMT Friday), the first 100 customers were allowed to take home a new console from Sony Building, a flagship display venue in Tokyo's bustling district of Ginza, putting the lucky few fans hours ahead of a nationwide mass release.

"Thank you for coming to this launch despite the cold," Andrew House, CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment (SCE), said to the first buyers.

Some of the eager fans had queued for two days to be among the first in Japan to own the new console.

"I want to play games with state-of-the-art technology," said Tetsuya Tamura, a 44-year-old IT engineer who arrived on Wednesday with his son, Shion, 19, to take first place in the queue.

Early adopters of the PS4 in Europe and the US have enthused over its vast computing capacity and the cinematic graphics it makes possible.

"I played on a trial one and found that its processing speed is fast and it's easy to play," said Shion, who had brought his PlayStation Portable to pass the time.

Mitsuhiro Chisaka, 30, who queued at another countdown event in Tokyo, said: "I can't wait to play PS4 as the domestic release was quite late. I'm a big fan of PlayStation and SCE. I hope Sony will regain momentum with this successful launch."



A Japanese customer (R) receives a Sony PlayStation 4 video game console following a countdown ceremony at the Sony building in the Ginza district of Tokyo on February 22, 2014

In the coveted US market, Sony boasted that video game industry sales data, reported last week by NPD Group, showed PS4 is far outselling Microsoft's Xbox One consoles, also released in November.

Analysts say sales at home are expected to widen the lead.

Sony's domestic rival, Nintendo, launched its new Wii U console in November 2012. It took more than a year for the video game giant to sell 5.86 million units.

PS4, Wii U and Xbox One are fighting to be at the heart of digital home entertainment at a time when consoles are under intense pressure to prove their worth as people increasingly turn to smartphones or tablets for games and videos.

Japan's home-use videogame market in 2013 shrunk some 40 percent to 409 billion yen over six years in contrast to the fast-growing smartphone game market, according to the Nikkei business daily.

From Walkman to junk

Sony's gaming division has emerged as a potential saviour for the once-mighty giant, which is struggling to reinvent itself in the digital age, having been left in the dust by nimbler rivals like South Korea's Samsung.

The company, whose iconic Walkman changed the way people listened to music, has failed to repeat its earlier successes and this year warned it would book a \$1.08 billion annual loss as it cuts 5,000 jobs and exits the stagnant PC market.



People pass before a large advertisement board of Sony Computer

Entertainment's PlayStation 4 video game console at Tokyo's shopping district Ginza on February 21, 2014

Moody's downgraded the firm's credit rating to junk, saying the maker of Bravia televisions had more work to do if it wanted to fix the holes in its tattered balance sheet.

It is not alone. Domestic rivals like Sharp and Panasonic have also suffered at the hands of US giant Apple and Samsung, and found themselves outplayed in the smartphone and low-margin television business.

But analysts said the PS4 might just help Sony turn the corner.

"Sony may not be able to see a sizable contribution for the current fiscal year, but is likely to harvest fruit later if the brisk sales continue," Hideki Yasuda, analyst at Ace Securities, told AFP.

"PS4 has a chance to establish a virtuous circle—strong sales leading to popular titles," which would create more demand for the console, Yasuda said.

"It can be a potential cash cow for Sony."

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