

Xbox 360: Roundup and Review

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In the ensuing war of the third-generation video-game consoles, Microsoft launched the first volley this past November with the release of its Xbox 360. Despite ample publicity, the [Xbox 360](#) has come under scrutiny. A much-hyped launch fell short of meeting demand with limited quantities of the console available and individual stores seeming to define their own rules as to how units would be sold.

The new console, available in \$399 and \$499 configurations, sports a triple-core microprocessor, much-improved graphics processor unit, optional 20 gigabyte hard drive, wireless and built-in networking, support for a wide variety of media, improved audio output and both standard and high-definition video output support.

It is more tightly integrated around Xbox Live, Microsoft's video-game network that allows players to compete or play cooperatively with each other

over the Internet. Users can also purchase additional game content, videos, demos and music through the Live network.

With the console's manufacturing costs currently standing it at \$552 per unit, the Xbox 360 follows Microsoft's historic model of initially losing money on the console and banking on turning a profit from licensing and accessories, especially the Live program. Manufacturing costs may drop as much as 50 percent by the end of 2006 according to a recent report by Merrill Lynch.

Microsoft did not meet its 90-day goal of selling 2.7 to 3 million units, partially due to a lack of units, according to a statement. In a survey of 125 retailers, ranging from Target, Wal-Mart, Best Buy and GameStop/Electronics Boutique, only 26 had both core and premium units stocked and only three retailers had more than one to three units available, according to a report by Amtech Research, a technology and defense company research group.

"They did a great job of creating the hype," Anita Frazier of the NPG Group, a consumer analytical firm, told United Press International. "The 360 has largely been out-of-stock at retail since its launch last November. So clearly, selling out is one sign of performance, but you can't say that its market potential has been even close to tested with the limited supplies available."

When asked how the console might perform in the coming year, especially with Microsoft's competitors releasing new products of their own, Frazier illustrated two factors; Microsoft has proven itself as a solid player in the video game industry and that there is naturally some hesitancy in the industry on the part of both game publishers and the consumers themselves.

"There is a little feeling of 'holding our breath' right now in the industry, waiting to see how all this will unfold," Frazier said. "Console transitions always make the publishing community nervous."

Some have claimed that the unit doesn't exhibit enough of a "next generation" feel, which seemed dramatically apparent when Nintendo transitioned from the Nintendo 64 to their current Gamecube console and when Sony migrated from the original Playstation to the Playstation 2, to attract enough sales. Others have criticized the lack of support lent toward older games and claimed that the console crashed or overheated during operation. The price also makes some balk, with new consoles at least \$199 more expensive than current systems and higher game prices.

"The graphics were great, but that's about it," said Ryan Conner, an avid game player, after playing Madden NFL 2006, one of the Xbox 360's launch titles. "I'd prefer Madden on the Playstation 2 by far."

Designed for a high-definition television, the Xbox 360 does not come across that very differently from a current Xbox on a standard cathode ray tube-based television. On a testing unit, it was also difficult to connect to a high-definition television and a smaller resolution had to be settled for until additional settings were changed from the television's end. A revamped audio/visual connector allows users to choose between HDTV and standard television modes, which helps in troubleshooting the device.

One of the main selling points of the new unit is as a multimedia "home" device that can play movies, music, games and be easily set up. Added features such as the ability to hook an iPod or other MP3 player in through a USB port and stream music through the console make things interesting. Once connected to a local network, the Xbox 360 can connect to other Windows PCs and find shared songs, pictures and media files with only a moderate amount of configuration in the Dashboard console.

Networking the unit was easy. Once hooked into a cable modem and a home router, the unit saw its network, registered easily with the Xbox Live network and made payment for a month's access relatively simple. Attach a USB keyboard to the unit and the device will load the appropriate driver and allow this to be used instead of navigating via the

controller to enter text.

However the wireless controllers did not always work in environments where multiple wireless networks were present and surrounding traffic might be interrupting communication between the devices.

Some of the best new features center around expanding and improving online play. Once a user signs on to the Xbox Live network, game data is sent along which continuously adds to the player's profile. Achievements such as passing a level, beating a game or unlocking a level are added to the profile, or gamer tag, which can be readily viewed by other players. This element is more social and as a player's overall rating improves via increases in Gamer Points, there seems to be an incentive to play longer.

Rethought and restructured, the Xbox Live network has been segmented and categorized by levels of interest that the player can specify. By selecting "Casual", "Recreational", "Underground" or "Pro", in the profile setup, the network will attempt to match players against opponents with similar interests. Players can also readily provide feedback regarding a person they played with online, thereby raising or lowering their overall profile rating.

The Xbox Live Arcade system actually proved to be among the favorite features of the device. Here, game demos could be quickly downloaded and full versions of video games could be purchased for under \$10. Though not as intricate or involved as a commercial/marquee title, the downloadable puzzle and retro arcade games can be just as, if not more fun, as longer titles.

While certain games brought out the strengths of the console, especially in terms of stunning visual and audio capabilities, others showed only a moderate improvement. Titles like *Condemned*, with an ultra-realistic lighting scheme, proved what the console could do.

A major drawback though is the lack of compatibility with older titles, especially considering the limited portfolio of games currently out for the 360. Users must download emulation software to

play older games, some of which may still not work.

It is hard to tell how the new system will do against Sony's Playstation 3, whose release date has been continually pushed back, and the Nintendo Revolution.

"It really depends on when the next two systems launch, and with what launch titles to drive demand for the hardware," Frazier said.

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