

Xbox One update plays up the 'game' part of console

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Microsoft is giving the Xbox One a new look as the company tries to focus its video-game console on its main function: gaming.

On Thursday, Microsoft will start rolling out the biggest software update for the device since its launch two years ago.

Most people will notice the change as a visual face-lift designed to cut the time it takes to find and start up games, chat with friends or watch videos. Also arriving with the update is the ability to play some games designed for the earlier Xbox 360.

The shifts come as Microsoft tries to make up ground it has lost to rival Sony since both companies released their latest [game consoles](#) in late 2013. The PlayStation 4 has maintained its predecessor's sales lead internationally and wrestled the top spot in the U.S. from Xbox, too.

The Xbox One, the third version of the game-console line Microsoft first released in 2001, represented a departure for the Seattle-area company. The device was pitched to consumers as a home-entertainment hub, a bid to broaden its appeal beyond gamers and open for Microsoft such entertainment realms as video streaming and even original films or TV shows.

The approach fell short. Gamers weren't as interested in a living-room hub and were turned off by unpopular policies, repealed before the console's release, that would have required an Internet connection to play games offline and restricted use of game discs.

Within the Xbox team now, "there is a focus on the core consumer, what they do, what they want to do, what they like," said Mike Ybarra, a director of program management at Microsoft, who oversees the design of the console's software and Xbox Live online subscription service.

"They wanted the ability to do common tasks faster and easier. That's really the No. 1 goal we have," Ybarra said.

The Xbox One's old tile-icon-based interface, a cousin of Microsoft's Windows 8 personal-computer operating system, gives way in the update to a vertically arranged home page that takes users to their most-used

features and saved items with one or two clicks of a controller.

Meanwhile, an always-accessible bar on the left allows quick access, even within games, to Xbox Live social-media features and the device's settings.

Brian Blau, an analyst who tracks video gaming with researcher Gartner and has tried the new software, said the update is a significant departure. In the previous interface, he said, "you had to dive into menus and submenus and tiles; not all of it was laid out logically. The redesign makes the whole system easier."

Also high on gamers' wish lists, and arriving Thursday, is the ability to play games built for the previous version of Xbox.

New game consoles typically make gamers' existing libraries obsolete, and Microsoft sees the new functionality as a selling point to persuade Xbox 360 users to get the latest model.

Microsoft says 104 Xbox 360 games will work on the Xbox One on Thursday. More are coming, a process that depends on user requests and Microsoft's ability to negotiate deals with publishers to approve their games' use on the newer device.

Ybarra says it's hard to understate the engineering hurdle such backward compatibility presented.

"It's like filling up your (gasoline) car with diesel," Ybarra said. "The guts inside those systems are completely different, they run on different code, and you have to find a way to translate that."

Microsoft is jealously guarding the advance, to the point that a spokesman interrupted when a reporter asked for a basic idea of what

made it possible.

Sony's game-studio chief told video-game news website Polygon the technology "must be very challenging," and said the Japanese company had no plans for a similar feature on PlayStation.

Microsoft is also trying to build ties between the Xbox and the massive audience of PC gamers using Windows. Xbox owners since July have been able to stream and play Xbox games using a Windows 10 PC screen.

Down the line, gamers on a laptop are expected to be able to square off against friends plugged in to a console if [game](#) developers enable the function.

More links are coming, Microsoft says, enabled by better lines of communication internally after the groups within Microsoft that make Xbox and Windows were joined in the same, mammoth organization within the company.

"It's a fundamental shift in how we think about gaming," said Mike Lavin, a marketing manager with Xbox Live. "We're progressing on the ability to stop playing on one device and pick up on another."

The effort to take advantage of Windows gaming on PCs or smartphones is an opportunity not as readily available to Sony or Nintendo, Gartner's Blau said.

"No one is going to go out and buy a new console because of a new user interface," Blau said. Still, he added, "When you think about how Microsoft can make up the difference (with Sony), these are the kind of steps they need."

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