

The Technical Philosophy behind the Consoles: How a Media Professor Sees the Systems

Right now there are three major video game systems competing for our entertainment dollars, Sony's Playstation 3, Nintendo's Wii, and Microsoft's Xbox 360. I regularly get asked by parents about what system should they get for their kids. This is a complicated question. I am pretty familiar with the companies behind the systems, and knowing each company's technical/ corporate philosophy helps in making this decision.

Nintendo used to be the 800 pound gorilla of the video game industry. There were years in the late 1980's and early 1990's when Nintendo was essentially the entirety of the American video game market. The late 1990's and early 2000's were not as successful for them, as they spent a tremendous amount of effort trying to stay ahead of Sony's Playstation, and failing to beat Sony's Playstation 2. When they launched their latest system, the Wii, Nintendo's President explained they made a change in their corporate philosophy after learning about a similar change made at Pepsi. Pepsi for years put tremendous money and effort into trying to beat Coca-Cola for market dominance. After failing to beat Coke, Pepsi realized they should really be putting their efforts into being the most profitable company they could be. This is why Nintendo realized they should be putting their effort into targeting the demographic they know best, children and families, rather than obsess about beating Sony for the hardcore video gamer. This has led to the Wii being wildly successful. This system has the widest array of family and children's games of the three systems. Be warned that it also has the worst graphics of the three current systems. Although they are clean and bright, the graphics are not fantastic, except on a handful of games. The Wii doesn't output a true HD video signal, thus games can appear blurrier than an equivalent game on the other systems. It has a huge library of games that are ideal for group/ party style play, and the best games are generally the ones made directly by Nintendo.

Microsoft has been fighting for a part of the home console market since the release of the original Xbox in 2001. They are the newest competitor of the three current systems, and their console has often been thought of as an answer to the core problem with Windows PC gaming. For a long time, the best video games and the best video game graphics were clearly on Windows PC's. Home consoles on a TV couldn't compete with the resolution of computer screens and the power of the dedicated video cards. Games on PC are also cheaper, because with consoles a portion of the sale price (usually between eight and fourteen dollars) goes to the maker of the video game system. The big drawbacks of using a Windows PC's as a video game system are cost (a gaming PC is generally \$750-\$1000 minimum) and upkeep. Patches, firmware upgrades, virus protection, updates and other issues make PC gaming a science unto itself. This is besides the fact that the \$1000 computer of today will not play the games of a year from now. When they launched the original Xbox, Microsoft was telling developers a PC game could be ported to the system in two weeks of development. That hasn't proved totally accurate, but the Xbox 360 has a huge library of excellent games, many of which were only available on PC previously. Since the system has been out for a few years, there is a great library of back titles available for discounted prices. The Xbox 360 puts out a full HD signal, and the graphics in games like Gears of War are just as good as anything I have seen on the Playstation 3.

Sony has done an amazing job basing their three consoles on predictions about the future of gaming. They launched the original Playstation at about the same time as forgotten systems such as the 3DO, the CD-I, the Jaguar, and the Virtual Boy. Much of the reason for the Playstation's success was their emphasis on 3-D graphics, while systems like the CD-i focused more on games like Tetris and CD-ROM informational titles. The 3-D graphics helped Sony win over hardcore gamers, and that has been their core demographic ever since. When they launched the Playstation 2 the Sony VP in charge of the project said that he thought the architecture inside the console was so advanced that developers would still be improving on games six years after the system was out. Games like Shadow of the Colossus proved him correct. The Playstation 3 is definitely the most advanced of the three systems, but almost self destructed when they launched the system at either \$500 or \$600 depending on options chosen. The game library is now comparable to the Xbox 360's and the price is now down to \$300. The Playstation also has a built in Blu-Ray player and just does a better job of bringing the internet to your TV than the Wii (not in HD) or the Xbox 360 (no real web access at all).

So when you're thinking about a new video game system , think about the games you want to play, how you are going to play them, and how much you want to spend. Ask your friends which systems they have, because you can link up and play together, even if they are in another state. You can videoconference between the same systems as well. Also think about what you want the system to be able to do. It isn't an easy decision, largely because these are three really great choices.

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