



Xbox 360 - A Preview

Both Playstation and Microsoft unleashed their plans and visions for the next generation of thumb-blistering hardware at E3 (Electronic entertainment Expo) in LA back in May. Gamers, geeks and the industry waited with baited breath. To a fanfare of lights, cameras and plenty of sneak-preview action, the 360 shone through, having ditched its cumbersome black box bulk for sleek new silvered lines and a design with more than a nod to Sony's previous award-winners.

The stakes this time round have been significantly raised. The gaming market has rocketed; estimates put the percentage of homes with one or more consoles as high as 30% in Europe and the US, with the demand for better graphics following suit.

The 360 takes up the gauntlet. Logged into the Live system with wireless controllers, a stunningly smooth ATI Xenos processing unit for state-of-the art visuals, and dual-layer DVD delivery of games, means the next outing in the Halo universe should blow our socks off.

Other titles whetting the gamer appetite include the movie-realistic shooter, Gears of War, and the street-burning, retina-bruising beauty of Test Drive, with its awe-inspiring landscapes, road tracks and range of cars and bikes to test your three-point turns. The development of 16:9 widescreen and cinematic surround sound will make you and walls tremble when they're turned up loud. It's in the details, with enemies allegedly being able to sweat! All taken with a healthy and well-worn dose of salt on announcement of the hardware at E3, but so far it looks like it will deliver.

There'll be a raft of launch titles for it, as opposed to the scant selection the last time. Zombie freaks can see the blood spurt on Monster Madness and unleash their mob mania with The Godfather, while the touchline gets it's winners with the likes of Madden NFL and NBA Live. From Tony Hawk to Tiger Woods, there's currently dozens of games in development. An unspoken rule at the moment hints that most developers aren't even concentrating too much on the present console games - such is the power and advances available to them from the new 360.

Two more aspect of the 360 make it a challenge to the PS3; the multimedia capabilities and the release date. This is where the 360 stands apart. There's been a huge drive to make the machine not just a games unit. It's been designed as the electronic "hub" for your house. You'll be able to plug cameras, music players and external devices into it, using its hard drive to record movies, stream your media files, burn CDs and, via Xbox Live Gold and Silver services, utilise video and voice messaging across the airwaves. The Live service will also allow user-friendly customising of the look of your machine and it's Marketplace interface will give access to new game downloads, patches and trailers of future releases, all available to store and upgrade onto your machine.

There's also a nifty Ring of Light and patented Guide Button on the new controllers. It allows you to change the electronic appearance of your machine and connects you instantly with all your multimedia add-ons and the Live network. Music, video, real-time interaction and downloads - it's basically a hard drive with a gaming heart.

There's no doubt the 360 will shake the market up but the console scrap continues to hot up. Despite its later release date, rumours abound that the hardware and power of the PS3 will trump Microsoft's multimedia unit and it could be hard to shift the legions of die-hard Playstation fans to the "dark side".

In the 360's favour though is the release date. Tentatively priced at around £250, the 360 is scheduled for a pre-Christmas release, trumping Sony by a good 6 months. The future of gaming looks bright!

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