

Battle is on for Hardcore Gamers Market

by Jeb Haught

By unleashing the XBOX 360 a year earlier than the competition, Microsoft has a head start on the next generation of console gaming. But Sony and Nintendo are now ready to enter the virtual boxing ring with their new consoles, the PlayStation 3 and the Wii.

While Sony seems to be directly competing with Microsoft by trying to create the most technologically advanced gaming console ever created, Nintendo is going in another direction. Rather than catering to hardcore gamers, Nintendo brings gaming to the masses with an incredibly innovative, easy-to-use interface designed to be as simple for youngsters as it is for grandmothers.

What is this device you may ask? Well, the answer is simple, yet also complex. The Wii's controller is what the Wii is all about. The system itself is barely more powerful than the original XBOX, with the maximum resolution output capped at 480p. But the Wii experience is much more about interaction than visuals. That isn't to say that all Wii games look bad, just not nearly as high-def as its counterparts (which is why it is more affordable, at \$250).

At first glance, the Wii controller looks like a TV remote control, but what's inside is what really counts. A small sensor bar placed underneath the TV senses movement in any direction, so the player can swing their arm to simulate an arm movement on-screen instead of pressing a button. There is also a laser pointer at the end of the remote that lets players point onscreen to choose options or interact with objects. What does this mean? It means games can now be controlled with simple arm movements and pointing instead of multiple buttons and analog sticks.

One great example of the potential of the system is found in a free game, called "Wii Sports," which comes bundled with the system. Five well-known sports, from golf to baseball to boxing, are included, and each one controlled just like it would be in real life. For golf, the player holds the Wiimote (short for Wii Remote) just like a golf club and swings away. The distance and angle of the shot are determined by the power and angle of the swing. Virtual baseball players swing the Wiimote just like a real bat, and boxing requires the "Nunchuk" controller add-on so players can punch with both arms. Although the graphics are atrocious for this game, it is still lots of fun due to the unique interactivity.

There is really not much to get excited about Nintendo's own racer, "Excite Truck," except for the way that it controls. The game itself is rather simplistic, with only a handful of gaming modes and no online play. However, the Wiimote makes a surprisingly good steering wheel when held sideways. Players must tilt the Wiimote left and right to simulate turning a steering wheel in the same direction, and tilt it forward or backward to maintain control during massive jumps. While it is fun for a while, "Excite Truck" is more like a budget title than a fully featured game.

On the other hand, "The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess" is yet another RPG masterpiece created by Nintendo. In this fun-filled journey, interacting with Link and his buddies has never been more realistic as players swing the remote to simulate sword attacks, and aim their bow with the laser pointer. Since this title is

also available on the GameCube, budding adventurers know that the game is first and foremost a full-featured RPG that just happens to also have unique controls for the Wii version.

Sega doesn't monkey around when it comes to next generation games, unless you are talking about their Wii exclusive title, "Super Monkey Ball: Banana Blitz." Since players must "tilt" the screen to make the monkey in the ball roll around obstacles toward the end of each level (it's easier not to ask why), the Wiimote is perfectly suited for this game. But the developers at Sega didn't stop there, as a whopping 50 different mini-games are available to play alone or with friends. Some of these diversions require the use of the nunchuk controller, and all of them are guaranteed to make you and your friends look quite silly.

Rather than venturing into a new frontier, Sony has decided to compete with Microsoft for the hardcore gamers market. Their new console, the PlayStation 3, can output visuals at 1080p resolution, a feat never seen done before on a console. However, not all games are created in 1080p, as it has a tendency to create awesome visuals at the cost of slower frame rates. When looking at current XBOX 360 games compared to PS3 games, they seem to look very similar. But keep in mind that developers have had an extra year to tap into the potential of the XBOX 360; so future PS3 games should look even better than they do now.

Both versions of the PS3 come with a built-in Blu-Ray movie player, which is why they cost more than their competitors (\$500 and \$600). After viewing a few Blue-Ray movies on the PS3 using a top of the line 2007 Mitsubishi DLP 1080p television, it is obvious that they look much more detailed than standard DVDs. Currently, it seems as though HD-DVD and Blu-Ray output visuals that are almost identical, so who knows which one will come out on top.

Anyone who buys a PS3 would be doing themselves a disservice if they didn't also purchase Insomniac's awesome first-person shooter, "Resistance: Fall of Man." While the idea of blasting aliens to kingdom come isn't entirely new, what is new is the unique array of futuristic weaponry that the "Ratchet and Clank" developers created. Examples include a weapon that shoots through objects, rockets that can be stopped and redirected in mid-air, and dual pistols that independently target two enemies at once. Highly advanced physics, gorgeous visuals and violent 20 vs. 20 online multiplayer skirmishes top off this must-have title.

Both "NBA 07" from Sony and "NBA 2K7" from 2K Games are the first games to be released that run at a natural 1080p resolution. This creates incredibly lifelike visuals and smooth player animations that look more like a sports broadcast than a video game. While "NBA 07" is a bit on the arcade side, blending realistic and unrealistic actions into game play, "NBA 2K7" sports a grittier look and is more grounded in reality. Both are very enjoyable, offer online game play, and show the extreme realism possible with the PS3.

"Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire" by Namco lets players control both Federation and Zaku forces in battles of epic proportions. Players can customize their armor and enter the battlefield in their battle-scarred metallic monstrosities. In addition to impressive visuals, players can blast arms off of enemy mobile suits as well as damage other individual parts. Any weapon blasted off of an enemy or held by their severed arm cannot be used any more in battle. Other features let the player customize and lead a squad of mobile suits, and

destructible environments help to immerse the player in the world of Gundam.

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