
Fortuity research report

CONSOLE YOURSELF...

The Fortuity Research *Brown Paper on Gaming Consoles* hit the streets last week (it was meant to be a White Paper, but there was an accident with the coffee machine), and young people around the country are eagerly scanning their copies to see what they think. The compilers of the Brown Paper have spared no effort in order to communicate with the youth of today: their detailed understanding of the Generation Y subculture means that they can "talk the walk" and get their message across clearly in terms that their users will understand.

The paper begins: "Hi, five cats! Here's the latest hot goss from the daddy-os and mummy-os at the Fortuity Factory! Chill out, dudes, and let us lay it on you about those groovy gaming consoles!"

Thanks to the translation facility at Babelfish (<http://www.babelfish.com>) I've been able to summarise the paper for *Online Currents* readers. Here is the introduction:

Video game consoles are big business. Over a million units are sold every month in the US and around 50,000 a month in Australia, at prices between \$200 and \$900.

The current console market is dominated by three manufacturers, Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo. All three produce top-end gaming systems, which consist of one or more hand-held controllers wirelessly communicating with a box or "console" which in turn plugs into a television set or high-resolution PC monitor. At the moment there are three main entrants in the console market: the Microsoft Xbox 360, the Sony PlayStation 3, and the new Nintendo Wii. All of them allow for multi-player games and allow users to connect up over the web via existing broadband connections and computer systems. All three systems also allow for parental control settings to prevent users playing violent or x-rated games.

Consoles are finding their way into other environments than the home. They are used for movement rehabilitation in stroke or injury victims, for instance, and are finding their way into libraries as entertainment and learning aids. In February the State Library of Queensland hosted an exhibition of playable game devices called "Game On".

Most modern gaming units contain such powerful processors that they are, in effect, mini-computers, and there is a thriving subculture of console users who get their kicks from pulling their consoles apart and tinkering with the hardware and software to see what computer-type things they can get them to do. This is not popular with the manufacturers, who make most of their profits from licensing and selling games – for between \$20 and \$90 each – and would prefer their consumers to buy those than using their devices for other purposes.

At the core of the Brown Paper are three extensive console reviews by modern teenagers. Daphne, Osgood, and Hamilton (not their real names) were each given a console and some games to try out. Their comments are given below, after a brief review of each platform.

-MICROSOFT XBOX 360

Microsoft is a fairly late entrant in the console gaming business. The first Xbox appeared in 2001, and the latest version, released in 2005, is the Xbox 360. In addition to the TV set display, the Xbox can also be connected by cable or wireless to a broadband internet connection and used to access online content, including Xbox Live, a worldwide online gaming network. The device consists of a console – with a DVD drive, hard disk, built-in microphone and connectors for cables and USB devices – and a hand-held wireless controller with batteries. Up to three more controllers can be purchased and used with the same console. A speaker jack means the Xbox can be used without a television connection as a music (or podcast) player.

Hamilton:

Hey, I can nearly afford one of these! The graphics are fantastic and the interface is easy. It's a shame there aren't more interesting games for it. There are only so many ways you can shoot and hit people. I liked Splinter Cell because you had to sneak around instead of busting in through the front door. Psychonauts is just weird – in a good way – because there are about 10 different worlds to explore, and they're all hilarious. Underground is about skateboarding. I liked that because there are so many different things you can do.

SONY PLAYSTATION 3

The Sony PlayStation has a much longer history than the Xbox, first appearing in 1994. The current version, the PlayStation 3, was released in 2006. Like the Xbox, it provides access to an online gaming service, but unlike the Xbox it also supports Blu-Ray, the latest high-density optical disk format. A range of models with different hard disk sizes is available. Most of these also include built-in wireless networking and card reading slots. All PlayStations have two or more USB jacks, and can support up to seven (wireless) controllers simultaneously. Because of its longer history there are many more accessories available for PlayStation systems than its competitors, including custom controllers and vibrating seats, and a much wider range of games available. USB keyboards are recognised and the device includes a web browser, giving it some basic PC functionality straight out of the box.

Sony admits to making a loss on sales of PlayStation units, hoping to recoup this from games sales. These have been lower than expected, though, partly due to some incompatibilities between the PS3 and the earlier PS2 model, which has a huge base of established users. It is the most expensive of the three main game consoles and likely to remain so as long as it continues to use cutting-edge hardware. But for parents who can't come to terms with the price, Sony continues to sell the older PS2, which remains popular, and the self-contained PlayStation Portable.

Osgood:

Wicked console – silver on black looks cool. They've got these at the library but they've blocked the bloodthirsty games. I like puzzle games, though. *Uncharted: Drake's Fortune* is my current favourite. *Folklore* (a fantasy murder mystery) is also good. Most of the good games are expensive, though. If I had to buy my own I'd get *Super Stardust HD* (a space exploration game), and *Everyday Shooter* (an arcade game with an original guitar-based soundtrack).

NINTENDO WII AND DS LITE

The Nintendo Wii broke with the console tradition maintained by its predecessor, the GameCube, and converted its controller into a long rectangular device that could be held and operated in one hand. By adding motion sensors and infrared communications, Nintendo produced a device that can send information to the console about the speed and direction of bodily movements. Thus the Wii allows the user to "play" whole-body games like tennis and bowling in addition to the limited options provided by button presses and joystick movements. As a result, the Wii has quickly outsold not only the lackluster GameCube but also the competing Xbox and PS3. Nintendo also scored over Sony by making the Wii fully compatible with older GameCube games. Since the release of the Wii many accessories have been produced to extend its capabilities even further.

The Wii console itself is relatively small and simple. It only reads dedicated optical disks, not DVD or Blu-Ray. It holds two USB ports and an SD card slot, and sells for roughly half the price of a PS3. The Xbox falls somewhere in between.

Nintendo also produce a hand-held portable console called the DS Lite, which competes with the PlayStation Portable but also acts as a controller when wired in to the Wii. DS Lite games come on memory cards rather than optical disks, making it a more portable package altogether.

Daphne:

I wasn't sure about the Wii because I already have a DS Lite, and that has some of the same games, but it's nice to have a bigger screen. If I had one at home I'd play online with my friends but we didn't have time to try that here. I liked *Disney Sing It* because you can use the controller as a microphone, and *Cooking Mama* where you stir and roll ingredients before you cook them. My elbow got a little sore from the bowling game. There seem to be more Wii games for girls, which is good. But if I was buying games or a console I'd check first to see what my friends had got.

GAMES

While some of the Wii games demonstrate that new hardware can stimulate creativity, most console games fall into predictable categories – shoot-em-ups, collaborative military missions, beat-em-up fighting games, car/plane/spaceraft racing, sporting simulations, and predictable – and usually

dreadful – spin-offs from popular movies and TV shows. One exceptional game is the popular *Guitar Hero* (various consoles), a musical game with guitar-shaped controllers that allow players to accompany popular music tracks.

Musical performances are also a factor in various karaoke-style, sing-along games. Other games use the graphics capabilities of the consoles to explore detailed, intricate worlds; and the *Wii Fit* games suite is becoming popular among adults as a fun way to exercise and lose weight.

US sales figures for 2008 (non-bundled games – <http://www.shacknews.com/onearticle.x/56786>) indicate that violent and competitive console games may be giving ground to more friendly collaborative activities. The best-seller was *Wii Play* (a pack of nine simple Wii games plus some demos), followed by *Mario Kart* (a cartoon character racing game), *Wii Fit* and *Super Smash Brothers* (a whimsical cartoon fighting game) – all for the Nintendo Wii. These were followed by action game *Grand Theft Auto* (Xbox and PS3) and military operations in *Gears of War* and *Call of Duty* (both Xbox). A football management simulator, *Madden NFL* (Xbox), also made it into the top 10.

Any library (or parent) looking to install a console gaming system should also consider the alternative of making games available on a PC. The costs are similar, and a PC also lends itself to a multitude of other activities, especially when a joystick or other specialised controller is attached. Most console games are available in PC versions, though they may not have the same levels of big-screen, high-resolution action and interactivity between players.

What does the future hold? The enormous success of the Wii must be prompting research into how to make controllers even more action-sensitive, and like PC games, many console games are appearing in massive online versions that thousands of players can participate in at the same time. The Matrix gets closer every day...

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