

Pushing your buttons

Steve Wright looks at Microsoft's contribution to the latest console war.

The Microsoft Xbox 360 was introduced to the Australian public a full nine months earlier than the Nintendo Wii or Sony PlayStation 3, and has since lost the lead it had built up in the beginnings of the latest console war.

However, it still manages to hold its own by delivering solid, straightforward gaming. In this second instalment of MCV's new technology feature, we'll set the record straight on

what the Xbox 360 has to offer – and which version may be best for you – before you decide whether or not to purchase Microsoft's pride and joy.

Microsoft offers three Xbox 360 packs to shoppers in what may be seen as a help or hindrance, depending on one's technical know-how.

At \$399.95, the Arcade pack is the cheapest of the bunch, packaged with a 256MB memory unit and bundled arcade classics like *Pac-Man* and *UNO*. The only problem: you won't be able to fit much downloadable content or game saves on such a small memory unit.

The Core pack sorts out space issues with a built-in 20GB hard-drive. At a suggested retail price of \$579.95, it also features a superior A/V cable than the Arcade pack, and two bundled games: *Forza Motorsport 2* and *Viva Pinata*.

The Elite pack, best of the three, comes with a 120GB hard drive and HDMI A/V cable for high-definition 1080p resolution. At \$729.95, the only thing not included in the pack is a game; make sure to pick one up at the same time (for another \$100) to get the most of your purchase.

While the Core and Elite packs are able to store lots of downloadable content, it all comes at a cost. A gold membership on the popular Xbox Live service – allowing access to online multiplayer capability – is \$80 for a year. All packs come with silver access to the system, but that only pro-

vides the chance to download extra content (like extra songs for *Guitar Hero 3*) and demos of other Xbox 360 games. Where Australians really lose out is in lacking the Xbox Live Marketplace; we cannot download Hollywood movies and premium content (think iTunes) as North Americans can.

Also on offer is an impressive back-

Blu-Ray as the medium of the future. While rumours are suggesting Microsoft may be releasing a Blu-Ray attachment soon, there's no way to currently gauge if the hypothetical unit would be priced as competitively as the HD-DVD was. The unit, now reduced to a life as a stylish paperweight, originally retailed around \$250.

IF THAT WASN'T ENOUGH, THE CONSOLE SUPPORTS WHAT'S FAST BECOMING A STAPLE IN THE INDUSTRY: BACKWARD COMPATIBILITY FOR ORIGINAL XBOX GAMES.

catalogue of over 200 games. *Halo 3* holds the record for the highest grossing opening day in entertainment history; *Bioshock* shows off the console's graphics power while introducing actual plot into a first-person shooter. Upcoming titles such as the highly-anticipated *Resident Evil 5* and the RPG *Fable 2* ensure that the console can satisfy gamers now and in the future. If that wasn't enough, the console supports what's fast becoming a staple in the industry: backward compatibility for original Xbox games.

For those looking to grab a dirt-cheap high-definition player no longer supported by any movie studio in existence, the now-defunct HD-DVD drive add-on is only an eBay search away. The format has gone the way of Betamax, losing out to

Despite some solid games in other genres, the Xbox 360 is fast becoming synonymous with the first-person shooter genre; great if you're a fan. Kudos to Microsoft for catering to those of varying budgets and intents with their various packs...providing shoppers can understand the differences between each. Picking up *Bioshock*, *Halo 3*, *Assassin's Creed*, *Lost Odyssey*, and *The Elder Scrolls III: Oblivion* will get you a nice cross-section of the console's best. Sticking to what the original Xbox did and improving upon that, the Xbox 360 is the least innovative of big three consoles, but with the power of Microsoft behind it, you know the console will be supported for quite a while.

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