

## COMMENT: The New Xbox Experience

### Who Wii'd on my console?

by Chris Hall published on 28 November 2008

We have now been living with the New Xbox Experience for a week, and what a headline grabber it has been. Stories of RRoD fails; consoles laid to waste left, right and centre. Well, perhaps it wasn't quite as drastic as that, but it certainly upset a fair number of people. But my question was, right from the start - does the Xbox need a new experience?

My first response would be to say no. I liked the Old Xbox Experience. A simple, but vivid "blade" menu structure, that was exceptionally easy to navigate and get to what you want. Yes, there were a few back and forth oddities flipping from one screen to another to make sure everything is rolling in the right direction, but generally it was pretty cool.

Contrast this with the PlayStation 3 menu with their XMB, or XrossMediaBar, and I always preferred the Xbox 360 menus, because they seemed to make much better use of the screen. One feature that I like on the PS3 is being able to have a wallpaper from the game disc you have loaded: a Grand Theft Auto 4 gives you a sense of purpose when you dip into the menu, and that lolly pop girl is pretty easy on the eye too. But overall I've always felt the Xbox menus just worked better.

Of course this isn't a two horse race and as we've seen, the Wii has raced ahead of the lumbering next-gen stallions. Whilst PS3 and Xbox 360 flex their vitamin-pumped gaming muscle, the lithe Wii has caught everyone off guard. What really works for the Wii, giving it that wide appeal, is addictive gaming that doesn't rely on guns. Yes, it seems that bobble-headed idiocy is what people want - it's how people have fun.

Which pulls us back round to the New Xbox Experience and the question of why someone has Wii'd on my console. The first reaction, perhaps,



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is rejection. I don't want this. I was happy with the old version. My Xbox is about driving and shooting, not Nintendo aping. It seems I'm not alone either. The charts for Xbox 360 game sales (last week, top 5, ELSPA) run down like this: Call of Duty: World at War; Gears of War 2; Need For Speed: Undercover; FIFA 09; Left 4 Dead. Guns, driving, sport.

PS3 sales for the same week give you a similar run down of Call of Duty: World at War; Need For Speed: Undercover; Tomb Raider: Underworld; LittleBIGPlanet; FIFA 09. What is perhaps notable about this snapshot is that it is mostly driven by new entries, while only LittleBIGPlanet really fits into the Nintendo-esque profile.

If we look at the Wii sales, you get a very different picture: Mario Kart Wii; Wii Fit; Wii Play; Wii Music; Mario & Sonic at the Olympic Games. What is noticeable about these is that they have dominated the charts for most of the year. They have longevity, the emphasis is on interaction and are best played with other people - quite the contrast to the rival consoles.

Ok, so most games do have a sociable element, giving you the option of killing your fellow gamers online, or driving cars into them at horrific speeds: not something that really fits with my bobble-headed avatar. Whilst my Gamertag is still the same, the gritty, visceral, street feeling I associated with my "tag" is slowly being pushed out by my cutesy alter-ego. It reminds me of the dawning of the new man in the 90s, when suddenly blokes were dabbling with highlights and using moisturiser.

But once over the fact that some things change, I've spent more time using the NXE to do all the things that I wasn't doing before. Partly because of the new structure and professional interest drives me to explore these things, but also because online content is more directly laid out before you. There seem to be more distractions through the opening Spotlight, altering you to

things you might want to check out, some of which would have been there before and some are new.

The appearance of friend's avatars is pretty funny and they do at least fit in with your chosen background so there is a level of theme cohesion. You can still have that urban feel, just with all your dorky mates sitting in the middle of it. But having friends at your fingertips does make this feel much more like a community than before, much more like social networking, with a pre-existing network, just like PlayStation Home will give us.

The new features are well documented online and if you have an Xbox, you've no doubt spent some time playing around with them already. But what is the overall effect? I feel it has shifted my focus from solely gaming to something extra: enjoying Microsoft's new fangled experience and consuming the content. I don't just turn it on to play, I'm now using it much more as a content portal.

The avatars also caught the interest of the wife, who has spent the weekend playing, ahem, Wii Sports, and loved the chance to get in and craft her new avatar, lovingly reflecting her Mii. Increasing the visibility of your networked content also changes the face of the new Xbox, whilst it always was that smart media hub, it is now apparent and yes, easier for the wife to spot and use.

So where does that leave us? I'm glad someone came and Wii'd up my Xbox. I'd not have invited them in to do so, but I'm taken with the change. Linking Xbox Live with Windows Live, was, in my opinion, a smart move, and now I'm keen to see how this new gaming dimension will crossover with my time online elsewhere.

My initial revulsion was perhaps immature: by becoming more infantile, the Xbox has possibly become more mature. And I'm off to Xtival 2008, to relive my youth.