



diversions

A Long and Lonely Walk A rapper turned actor trying to become a rapper, Eminem, plays a familiar role in the first blockbuster to properly portray the hip-hop underground, "8 Mile."
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Console Companies Wage Gaming Wars

Coke vs. Pepsi. Backstreet Boys vs. 'N Sync. Boxers vs. briefs. And now, Sony vs. Nintendo vs. Microsoft. In a video game industry that has experienced a rush of popularity and an explosion of profits in recent years, these three companies are fighting a war of business deals and bottom lines. Sony's Playstation 2, Nintendo's GameCube and Microsoft's Xbox have been duking it out for consumer dollars.

BY ELLIOTT DUBE
Assistant Arts & Entertainment Editor

The greatest success story for Xbox so far has been "Halo," a smash-hit first-person shooter with a man-versus-alien storyline. Nintendo's "Super Mario Sunshine" is the latest vehicle for the beloved Italian plumber. Sony's system has seen many first-class games come its way — "Gran Turismo 3 A-Spec," "Final Fantasy X" and "Grand Theft Auto 3" have brought favorable reviews and huge sales.

Consoles Compared

Get to know the world's three biggest gaming systems.



Nintendo GameCube

Price: \$149.99
Processor speed: 485 MHz
Polygon speed: 12 million per second
Game medium: Proprietary 1.5-GB optical disc
Online: 56.6K modem and broadband adapter (both for \$34.95)



Playstation 2

Price: \$199.99
Processor speed: 300 MHz
Polygon speed: 70 million per second
Game medium: Proprietary 4.7-GB DVD
Online: Network adapter (\$39.99) comes with all necessary software, hardware. Requires phone line/broadband connection.



Xbox

Price: \$199.99
Processor speed: 733 MHz
Polygon speed: 125 million per second
Game medium: Proprietary 4.7-GB DVD
Online: Xbox Live, a universal subscription online service available for \$49.95/year. (The Xbox includes a built-in Ethernet port, but a separate broadband connection is required.)

Games are like bombs in this industry — the really good ones can sell hardware for one company while cutting into the sales of the other two. At times, the console wars have proved to be especially costly for the participants. Sega, whose Genesis console battled the Super Nintendo Entertainment System for top dollar in the early 1990s, recently gave up the console fight and switched its focus to making games. The Sega Dreamcast had been eclipsed by the next-generation systems of Sony, Nintendo and Microsoft.

"They were leaking money like a sieve," said David Smith, PSX/PS2 editor for IGN.com. "Over the life of the Dreamcast, Sega repeatedly required massive cash infusions from its parent company to stay in business."

"Microsoft is in the same position, in a way, but the difference there is that Microsoft can blow all the money it wants on a long-term gamble."

With the Xbox, Bill Gates and company have shot for the moon on their first try. The system's hardware is more capable than that of the Playstation 2 and the GameCube. But in this war, allied support is just as effective as the power of a company's weaponry. At this point, Sony has the largest game library and the success of its first Playstation to help the PS2.

"This generation has shown, more than anything else, the power of an established brand as opposed to an immediate advertising campaign," Smith said. "People seem to have bought the Playstation 2 almost out of reflex. That was the brand they trusted."

Sony got a head start on the Nintendo 64 with the first Playstation and managed to take control of the market with a wealth of good games. Nintendo, previously the industry's giant, saw its power diminish as the Nintendo 64 struggled to compete.

Nintendo, the home of the Mario and Zelda franchises, may have lost some of its luster, but the company still has plenty of fight left in it.

"(Nintendo) still makes a tremendous amount of money by selling these games that are made in-house," said Ben Silverman, editor in chief of game-revolution.com.

A new aspect of video games — how well they play online — also could be a strong factor in their monetary performances. Each of the three consoles has the ability to connect gamers from all parts of the world.

Microsoft has been the most ambitious in its online aspirations, drawing from its experience in the market of personal computers. The company's subscription-based Xbox Live online service allows Microsoft to operate each game's network. Sony and Nintendo have been quieter on the online front.

They have both released network adapters to little fanfare, and both have given developers the bulk of control over online games.

As a result, third-party corporations that devote themselves to making noteworthy titles are looking at each system's online setup. But most of them aren't limiting their efforts to a single console.

"The companies have learned over the years that if you put all your eggs in one basket, you can really hurt yourself that way," Silverman said.

Regardless of whether more third-party companies are becoming "platform-agnostic," as Silverman put it, one of the major players clearly has come out on top.

"The PS2 has a comfortably insurmountable lead," Smith said. "In any of the three major territories and worldwide, it has Nintendo and Microsoft each beat by three to five times, depending on which figures you look at."

Playstation 2 is the king — for now. But new blockbuster titles and the growing online realm will open up new battlefields in this competition.

With so much money and market power at stake, no one's going to surrender any time soon.

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GAME OVER, HOLLYWOOD

Video Games Conquer Film Industry in Sales For the 1st Time

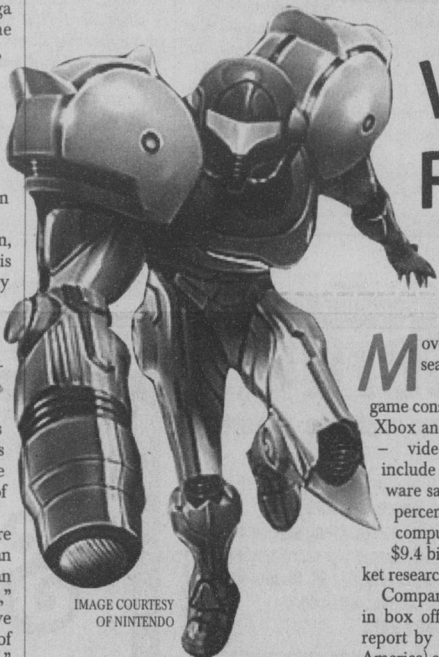


IMAGE COURTESY OF NINTENDO

Samus Aran (above) is the star of Nintendo's upcoming "Metroid Prime" for the GameCube. Link (below) has been battling the evil Ganon since the first Nintendo Entertainment System.



IMAGE COURTESY OF NINTENDO

Move over, Rocky. Step aside, 007. Take a seat, Skywalker. Your time has passed.

Following the newest wave of video game consoles — Sony Playstation 2, Microsoft Xbox and Nintendo GameCube — video-game sales, which include both console and software sales, have skyrocketed. Riding a 43 percent increase over 2000, grosses for the computer and video-game industry totaled \$9.4 billion, according to a report by market research group NPD.

Compare that to the \$8.41 billion garnered in box office sales in 2001 (according to a report by the Motion Picture Association of America) and one thing becomes clear — video games aren't just for kids.

"We now see that all kinds of people of all ages are playing — and obviously buying — video games," said Beth Llewellyn, director of public relations for Nintendo of America. "We predict that, in total, video games could possibly be greater than a \$10 billion industry this year."

And if past trends have been any indication, it will be much more than that. Market analysts, such as the Interactive Digital Software Association, predicted that sales would slump last year due to the crumbling market and decreased spending in entertainment fields following the events of Sept. 11.

Instead, the market surged, showing record growth and sales not only in consoles — with the release of the new system — but also in software sales. According to IDSA, Americans purchased 225.1 million units of computer and video games last year.

The huge gain of the industry in the past few years, Llewellyn said, is a reflection of the appeal of video games and their qualities of lasting entertainment.

"Video games are just a lot more fun. At the movies you pay \$7 or more to sit for an hour and a half and watch someone else's story," she said. "But with video games you get to have adventures of your own."

"You really just get a better value and more entertainment for your money."

And with newly released games' prices ranging from \$30 to \$55 — depending on producer and console — the industry has no trouble funding its game creation.

But more money does not make for better games, Llewellyn said.

"Some of the best quality and highest-selling games that we currently have on the market are not even visually impressive, much less groundbreaking," she said. "The Pokémon games are a great example of how you do not have to throw a lot of money at a game to make it great or to have it sell great."

"It might look pretty and might sell a lot the day it launches, but games that just aren't fun won't have any classic appeal — word spreads."

And with greater credibility due to greater competition and market exposure, video-game makers have to keep things interesting.

"You can't just put a character in a 3-D world with a gun anymore; things are just getting too competitive," Llewellyn said. "We just have to keep video games exciting."

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IMAGE COURTESY OF SQUARESOFT

Squaresoft's "Final Fantasy X," starring Tidus (above), has been a blockbuster title for Sony's Playstation 2.

Games, Technology Growing Up With Original Players

From Atari's original "Pong" game to the elaborate graphics and special effects of "Final Fantasy X," the video-game industry has come a long way.

By MICHELLE JARBOE
Staff Writer

The simple schematic of games such as Nintendo's original "Super Mario Bros." has become a distant memory, eclipsed by elaborate characters and storylines.

"Ten years ago, it could be argued that video gaming was still the arena of hobbyists and children," said Steve Perkins, senior product manager with Electronic Arts.

"Video games systems were viewed much as toys. ... Today the hardware is much more sophisticated and video games are no longer viewed as toys but as entertainment systems."

EA Sports' most popular games are prime examples of this advancement. Though "Madden NFL" was EA's leading game 10 years ago, Perkins said it was far from realistic.

"Today it's like watching a sports game on TV, like the actual event's happening," he said. "You've taken a lot more of the sport and brought it into the video game, which you haven't been able to do before."

Multiple camera angles, players whose faces are modeled after those of the actual athletes and even customization of play take

sports games leaps and bounds from their two-dimensional, childish predecessors.

An older, more expectant gaming audience is now the hot target for the video game industry, which is moving in the direction of more elaborate, often more mature, games.

"The audiences have matured, and their tastes have matured," said Beth Llewellyn, director of public relations for Nintendo of America. "They want something that is more engaging, with a harder edge."

It seems the gaming industry has jumped to cater to this desire among gamers. Playstation's popular "Final Fantasy" franchise, made by SquareSoft, is directed at

teens. "BMX XXX," an upcoming and controversial release from Acclaim, has been classified as mature, for users 17 and older.

Hugo Reyes, public relations manager for Namco, said the more mature leanings are natural, considering the aging gaming audience.

"Nowadays, more successful games are those that are being rated mature," he said. "Basically, from what I understand, the average age of the gamer is between 18 and 24, or it could be even older than that. The people who grew up playing the original arcade games are in their 20s and 30s now."

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The Mario Evolution

The world's greatest Italian plumber has gotten his share of facelifts over the years.

IMAGES COURTESY OF NINTENDO



1985: "Super Mario Bros." for the Nintendo Entertainment System.



1990: "Super Mario Bros. 3" for the Nintendo Entertainment System.



1991: "Super Mario World" for the Super Nintendo Entertainment System.



1996: "Super Mario 64" for the Nintendo 64.



2002: "Super Mario Sunshine" for the Nintendo GameCube.