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November launch date for latest PlayStation

Sony's console's technology promises free rein to game developers' imaginations

by Peter Nowak
technology editor

Sony's PlayStation 3 console looks like it's going to pack quite a wallop — both in gaming power and to consumers' wallets.

The Japanese company's long-awaited next-generation console launches on November 11 in Japan and on November 17 in the rest of the world.

Based on current exchange rates, the PS3 will retail in New Zealand for $999 with a 20 gigabyte hard drive, and $1199 for a 60GB version.

"It's relative to what it is," said Warwick Light, general manager of sales and marketing for Sony Computer Entertainment New Zealand, of the pricing.

The current-generation PlayStation 2, released five years ago, also sold for $999 on launch.

But the PS3 is priced significantly higher than its main next-generation console rival, Microsoft's Xbox 360, which went on sale here in March with a price tag around $750.

Light, speaking from the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) in Los Angeles, said the PS3 had significant advantages over the Xbox 360.

The console's "Cell" processor has twice the computing power of its rival and, when combined with Nvidia's RSX graphics chip, games developers will be limited only by their imaginations, Light said.

While the combined processing power may not be immediately apparent in some of the launch titles, future games will start to look like "something that's never been seen before".

Sony has also chosen to include a high-definition DVD player with the PS3.

Sony and Microsoft are on different sides of the fence in supporting two competing high-definition DVD standards, with the Japanese company pushing its Blu-ray version and the software giant favouring the HD-DVD model.

Microsoft hedged its bets and held off on incorporating a high-definition player into the 360, going instead with standard definition. The company announced at E3 it would sell an add-on HD-DVD player for the 360 in the United States by Christmas, but declined to set a price. Sony has fully committed to Blu-ray with the PS3, with the console's DVD player supporting the format. All PS3 games and movies will be Blu-ray.

Market analysts say the decision is a big gamble for Sony, as it's still too early to say which of the two competing standards will eventually win with consumers.

Light said that with half the major movie studios, two big record labels and the adult film industry so far committing to Blu-ray, the move isn't that big a risk for the company.

The PS3 will also feature an innovative "4D" wireless controller, which has a motion sensor that detects its user's movements. In effect, the user will be able to direct on-screen action simply by moving the controller rather than through its directional pad.

Not all games will support this feature, and users will be able to toggle it on and off, Light said.

The PS3's controllers also connect through Bluetooth and the console will be able to support up to seven at a time, rather than the four that have become standard — a feature that raises some intriguing multi-player gaming possibilities.

Sony is planning to launch eight of its own titles with the console, and the company expects up to 20 — including a new Final Fantasy role-playing game — to be available in November.

The console will also feature media centre capabilities similar to the 360's, including USB connectivity, which means it will be able to work with MP3 players and digital cameras.

It will also have wireless connectivity with Sony's PlayStation Portable, which will integrate with PS3 games. The PSP, for example, could act as a virtual rearview mirror in driving games, Light said.

Sony also plans to claw back some of Microsoft's lead in online gaming

with the launch of a networked community, to be launched at the same time as the PS3.

Users will be able to download game content, such as songs for the Singstar karaoke title, and use voice-over-internet to have conversations. Users will also be able to use the PS3's camera to upload videos of themselves performing Singstar songs, for sharing with the community.

Sony could also potentially use the online component to sell music downloads from its huge catalogue of artists. Light said there was no immediate plan to do so, but added that there is an intention to do so in the future.

The PS3's online capabilities could possibly be limited in New Zealand, where broadband speeds and download limits could be problematic.

The console is designed to be online at all times — Light said users will be able to download content while watching a movie, for example — which could result in users chewing through their meagre limits very quickly.

"We won't know the effects until we beta test it with Telecom," Light said.

Over all, the PS3 is of huge importance to ailing Sony, which has seen its

fortunes fall in recent times.

The company in April forecast sharp drops in operating profit at many of its divisions in the year ahead, and also reported a ¥66.5 billion ($961 million) fourth-quarter loss — worse than its ¥56.5 billion loss for the same period a year earlier.

"PlayStation 3 has been identified as an absolute key product in Sony's lineup," Light said.

Gamers check out the new PS3 at E3 in Los Angeles.

SONY PLAYSTATION 3

Sony Corporation said it would begin selling its PlayStation 3 (PS3) video game console in November, setting the stage for a three-way showdown with Microsoft's already released Xbox 360 and Nintendo's upcoming Wii.

Tokyo-based Sony plans to take a US$882m operating loss at its game division in the current fiscal year ending March 2007 due to heavy start-up costs for the PS3.

PREVIOUS GENERATION SALES

- Sega Dreamcast: 11
- Nintendo Gamecube: 20.6
- Microsoft Xbox: 24
- Sony PlayStation 2: 100

May 2006, worldwide console figures in millions

RELEASE DATES
Japan	Nov 11, 2006
Worldwide	Nov 17, 2006

PRICE (20GB HDD models)
N America	US$499
Japan	US$536
Europe	US$634
NZ	NZ$999

Sony to hit market with 2m PS3 consoles at launch, 2m more by end Dec 2006.

THE MACHINE
- **Cell Processor running at 3.2GHz.** Co-developed with Toshiba and IBM, Sony is counting on PS3 sales to reduce production costs of the chips and then putting them in digital electronic products.
- **Blu-ray Drive.** Sony is hoping the PS3, with its equipped Blu-ray drive, will achieve a victory over HD DVD as the PS3 offers a full entertainment system for roughly the same price of an HD DVD player.
- **RSX GPU running at 550MHz with full HD-TV support.**
- **20GB/60GB Hard Disc Drive (HDD).**
- **Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and Ethernet connection to PlayStation network offering free and paid content.**

THE CONTROLLER
- **'Six-axis motion sensing system'** allows control without touching a button
- **Bluetooth wireless**
- **USB port for charging**
- **Supports up to seven controllers**

Source: SONY, PlayStation.com, International Data Group. REUTERS/HERALD GRAPHIC

Spam is clobbering legitimate bulk emailers

Xtra joins the internet providers who are restricting the size of mailing lists

PETER GRIFFIN
web walk

THINK for a moment about the following piece of information: Xtra, the country's largest internet provider with 600,000 customers, blocks 20 million to 25 million spam emails each week.

That's a lot of unsolicited junk email sent out by spammers, who are usually based offshore.

We all want to see the death of spam. Even if you have good filters diverting spam to a folder you never look at, the cost of providing the internet bandwidth to accommodate all that traffic and the software required to sift through it is significant. We ultimately pay for it in higher internet charges.

Xtra has joined other local internet service providers in blocking email sent to 100 recipients or more. It's a two-way thing. If you're an Xtra email

account holder you won't be able to receive the email if you're on the list. If you're a sender, the mail won't be delivered if the group has 100 or more addresses.

Xtra is following best practice by ISPs overseas and other local providers have already done it (ihug blocks email to groups with more than 50 addresses, and Clearnet's magic number is 128).

But there are legitimate reasons for

sending out bulk email messages. The sender may want to tell all the members of their tennis club about an upcoming tournament or, if it's a business, send a newsletter to customers. With the blocking, it's becoming increasingly difficult to do these innocuous things.

The trend is forcing small businesses to start using more expensive software or monthly mail subscription packages. This is the real down-side of spam — innocent net users take the fall for the actions of a small group of abusers.

There are a few options for those who want to keep on sending bulk emails — the simplest is limiting the recipient list to 99 or fewer. Rather than sending one email to 250 people, the same can be accomplished by sending out three.

Senders can also invest in software that ships off email automatically, either individually or in groups, among them Bmail, Mailman and Lyris. They range in price, from free

for up to 50 recipients to several thousand dollars for the industrial-strength packages that send to tens of thousands of people automatically.

The good ones use a double opt-in mechanism that ensures recipients have a say over what they receive. They also expose IP addresses so the recipient knows where the message has come from.

A better option for those sending regular newsletters to hundreds or thousands of people is a hosted email service. One such service is available through the small business website at ourbiz.co.nz, which allows users to send up to 5000 emails a month for $50. The service is hosted by email marketing company BKA Interactive (www.bka.co.nz), which supplies the necessary software. As email becomes a more important marketing tool, leveraging off the experience of an email marketing company may even improve mail-out results.

Xtra's move, unfortunately, is a blanket policy and there's no "white-

list" senders can apply for. Xtra simply has too many customers to police such a list.

But once again, the ISP's actions have been badly executed. Xtra has admitted it should have had the policy in place years ago, but it started blocking bulk emails in March without giving any notice to its users. It had the right to do so because the restriction on bulk emailing has been sitting overlooked in its terms and conditions since 2003.

The timing of Xtra's move to enforce its policy is interesting.

With the Unsolicited Electronic Messaging Bill before Parliament, Xtra's owner Telecom and others in the industry, including Internet NZ and the Direct Marketing Association, are keen to ensure a Government body within the Department of Internal Affairs is set up to deal with complaints about spamming.

When it's illegal to send unsolicited messages to New Zealand email accounts, the level of complaints will

soar and ISPs don't want to be left to sort out the disputes that will inevitably arise. Xtra wants to send a message that it's getting tough on spam to encourage the formation of such a body.

As for the legislation, will it work? Not likely. It's a gesture of good intent, but most spam originates outside New Zealand and those users who are caught in the dragnet are a tiny percentage of the spammers' daily catch.

Ultimately it comes down to the individual user. If an email is an ad for generic Viagra or a $10 copy of Windows XP, for God's sake don't reply to it. Determining the legitimate businesses from the spammers can be difficult, but recipients would do well to check the email's domain name and find out about the company sending it before replying.

Otherwise they'll just end up on another automatic list labelled "live suckers".

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Cheap, clunky, quirky silver box multi-talented and honest

Legend is typical of lesser known Asian brands — packed with functionality

by Peter Griffin

I first came across the big, silver Legend brand a few years ago at a technology trade show in Berlin and wondered why the Singapore-based consumer electronics maker didn't export to New Zealand.

Well, it seems Legend now does. The company makes computer memory modules and, as well as supplying the likes of Acer and Dell, has it's own line of budget mp3 players, DVD recorders, LCD screens and personal media players.

Legend is typical of these well-known brands coming out of Asia — they shy away from competing with the Apples and Sonys on styling and instead pack as much functionality and as little annoying digital rights management software into their devices as possible. The Legend Media

LEGEND MEDIA PLAYER

- **Pros:** Line-in recording; AV-out.
- **Cons:** Poor menu lay-out; average styling.
- **Price:** $293.
- **Herald Rating:** 7/10.

Player is a prime example. It's no video iPod. The Legend's 100-gram body is sturdy but rather uninspiring, the stiff buttons push down with an audible "clunk".

There's no scroll wheel or touch sensitive dial here. The full-colour, 2.4-inch screen is of a reasonable resolution, good enough for watching short video clips, and the menu system is comprehensive but not too intuitive.

But the Legend Media Player plays mp3, wma and wav audio files and delivers decent sound. Its 1.3-megapixel camera will record reasonable-quality photos and video clips in daylight, about as well as a mid-range camera phone. It has an FM radio tuner and comes with a 1 gigabyte Multimedia Card to go with the 128 megabytes of onboard flash memory.

The device also has a few useful extras, including line-in recording for use with a microphone or other recording source, and an AV-out port to play the photos, music and video stored on the media player through an LCD computer monitor or regular TV.

It supports mpeg4 video files, but DivX movie files didn't seem to be compatible. It records video in the .asf file format and chews up memory at a rate of 6MB per minute.

The player's Lithion-ion battery supports up to six hours of video playback and 15 hours of audio play. It connects to the computer via a swift USB 2.0 cable and is immediately identified

by Windows XP, appearing as an extra drive in Windows Explorer. The user can simply drag the files wanted from the computer into the appropriate folders on the player.

The player's colourful screen menu is its weakness. Viewing the memory card's contents is clunky and navigating tedious.

The device also doesn't have an independent volume control, which is annoying. Instead, a "mode" button switches the main jog control between volume, equalizer and play functions. I'd rather have an easy to reach volume control seeing as there is none built into the headphones cable.

But the Legend Media Player is after all a cheap little gadget that's multi-talented. Once it's in your pocket, you'll forget its little quirks. Plug it into your TV set and suddenly a tiny little box is your entertainment hub. It claims to be nothing it isn't, and is one of the cheapest devices of its kind on the market here.

LOW KEY: The Legend Media Player plays mp3, wma and wav audio files and is one of the cheapest devices of its kind on the market here.