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Xbox takes it to the next level

In games tested the 360's graphics were extraordinary, motions more fluid, lighting effects ultra-realistic and glitch-free

by Peter Nowak technology editor

Microsoft's Xbox 360 has finally arrived in New Zealand and the question is, has it been worth the wait? The answer: most assuredly so. Just as the original Xbox's inno-

vations drove video gaming and home entertainment to the next level, the 360 improves on all that and sets some impressive new standards. It truly is a next-generation console.

The 360's most noticeable improvement is its graphics, which sounds strangely underwhelming because continued evolution in this area has become a given. Still, when hooked up to a high-definition television, the 360's graphics are utterly stunning.

In the dozen or so games tested by the Herald, the graphics were aston-ishing across the board — motions were more fluid, lighting effects were ultra-realistic and animation glitches known as "clipping" were virtually non-existent.

The 360 is also an impressive all-inone entertainment box, even more than its predecessor was. Wireless controllers — ones that work well, anyway — are long overdue, and it's a real pleasure not to be shackled to within a few feet of the console. I was actually able to continue playing while visiting the bathroom, not that anyone really wanted to know that.

It introduces USB connectivity for devices such as MP3 players and digital cameras. That means users can hook up their iPods and stream music to the console, or view slideshows of pictures from their cameras, or even both at the same time.

A new remote control also expands beyond simple DVD navigation. It can turn the 360 on and off, fast forward photos during a slideshow and even skip songs on the iPod — a highly welcome feature for consumers unwilling to shell out \$60-plus for an over-priced Apple-brand remote.

Speaking of Apple, Microsoft has obviously borrowed some style notes from its rival — the 360 is sleek and white, not clunky and black like its predecessor. It's a much nicer device.

The 360 has expanded its online capability with two tiers — Xbox Live Silver and Gold. Silver is included with the console and gives users free access to movie trailers and game demos, and Skype-like voice chats and





GRAPHIC DELIGHT: Ghost Advanced Recon Warfighter (above) and Fight Night Round 3 (below) are best enjoyed on a high-resolution television

thoroughly entertaining. The player consorts with a colourful cast of characters, including Zen master Sebastian and a weirdo named Wiener Boy, whose combined craziness is strangely funny.

The game also incorporates bizarre and seemingly random cut scenes, including frame-by-frame animations acted out by action figures and dolls, to move the story along. Throw in some ninjas and boy bands, and the result is one insane experience. It's a hard game to put down. And the winner is

INBOX Neil's American friend recom-

mended that he should download Skype. He got part way until he was informed that he had a restrictive firewall. The message told him that " to work reliably, Skype needs unre-stricted outgoing TCP access to all destination ports above 1024 or to ports 80 (preferred) and 443". It will also be "greatly improved if outgo-ing UDP traffic to all ports above 1024 is opened up and allow UDP 1024 is opened up and allow UDP replies to come back in." Neil wants to know what all this means. Essentially it means you have to set

the firewall to allow those ports to have access. It depends what your firewall is — if it is the built-in Win-dows firewall, it's simple to add these port numbers to the excep-tions needed. Go to Control Panel/ Firewall/Exceptions/Add Port and experiment with adding the listed ports to the exception list.

Terry is one of many readers who could not understand why I suggested getting a new computer merely to upgrade from Windows 98 to XP. He is wondering if that's perhaps a bit drastic.

Machines under three years old should have no issues with the Windows upgrade, but older Windows 98-based machines commonly run on 128 megabytes or less of RAM. At this level of memory, XP runs poorly. Anything more than three years old uses RAM that is often no longer available or hard to find unless sourced second-hand. As for hardware older than 2001, drivers for specific components may not exist or are flaky. The required upgrade may end up costing the same as a new low-end computer, which is far superior in ability. Spending a fortune on sourcing compatible hardware for upgrading, then finding the machine doesn't run at an acceptable speed, is a bad investment. Best to get a new guaranteed box fully updated and conversant with XP and eliminate the need to solve unforeseen incompatibilities? With Microsoft 98 and ME support ending mid-year, their life is in its twilight.

Email your questions to Don McAllister, inbox@nzherald.co.nz, including software name and version. The Inbox archive is at nzherald.co.nz/inbox



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messaging outside games. A gold subscription is needed for multiplayer gaming

Both tiers give users access to Xbox Live Marketplace, where they buy "Microsoft points" to exchange for full downloadable games. These include original games such as Hexic to arcade classics, including Gauntlet and Joust.

But the console is not without its downsides. First is its fairly high price – the basic model, without hard drive or wireless controller, is available for \$549 while the full version is \$719.

The wireless controllers run on AA batteries, with an optional recharger module for about \$40. This seems to defeat the Xbox's philosophy of providing gamers with a total package

The 360 can also connect to a PC to share music and photos, but this is hardly an easy process for the average person. Users will likely have to spend some time updating their PCs with the proper Windows upgrades, then puzzle through getting the console to talk to the PC. An understanding of home networking or a call to tech support is necessary.

Lastly, in order to take advantage of the 360's best feature — its graphics – an upgrade to a high-definition TV will be needed. The graphics are noticeably improved on a standard television, but they only really become astonishing in high-definition. I was fortunate enough to test the console on a giant Panasonic Viera plasma screen, and it's hard to go back.

Over all, the Xbox 360 is a giant step forward — not just in gaming, but in home entertainment. It works beautifully in conjunction with the other pieces of electronics commonly found in the living room, and it also effectively connects those components to the internet.

Most importantly, of course, are the games — the 360 plays about 200 original Xbox games and features about 20 launch titles. Here is the Herald's pick of the new litter.

Fight Night Round 3

I hadn't played a boxing game for ages, so I was quite looking forward to EA's latest squared-circle opus. Simply put, it's a knockout.

Fight Night Round 3 is an excellent showcase for the 360's graphics, with the real-life boxers looking, well, reallife. The lighting effects are stunningly dramatic, from fights in dimly-lit, smoky gyms, to arenas packed with

fans shooting off camera flashes. The boxer animations are also outstanding — individual beads of sweat and blood can be seen flying from the impact of a punch. Knockdowns and knockouts are

easily the most entertaining part of the game. When a boxer goes down, a slowmotion replay captures the felling blow in all its agonising, graphic detail. The boxer's cheeks puff up, his eyes glaze over, squirts of blood go flying — all in beautiful cinematic slow-mo. It's enough to make you jump out of your seat and cheer.

Players can use greats such as Evander Holyfield, Joe Frazier or even Muhammed Ali, or they can play through career mode with their own creation. The gameplay itself doesn't feature

as much button mashing as one would games expect. Like real boxing, strategy is

required — swinging for the fences with power punches will likely result in the boxer staring at the ceiling wondering what happened. Feints, parries and blocks need to be combined with strategic jabs and uppercuts in order to triumph over more challenging opponents.

Project Gotham Racing 3

There always seems to be a surplus of racing titles released alongside any new console, and it's probably because such games often provide a good showcase for the graphics. The 360 is no different, and Project Gotham Rac*ing 3*— another sequel in a fine line of racing games — is easily the best of the bunch

Obviously, not much in the way of explanation of how such titles work is needed — players race cars, earning points and dollars that unlock new cars and tracks.

PGR3 has done away with a lot of the basic cars — rather than starting out in a boring Honda in career mode, players can opt to go straight for Ferraris and Lamborghinis. They can also choose to stick with the car they like, rather than having to switch between classes as in the previous

The game modes are familiar to

PGR veterans — street race, cone and speed challenge, overtake and fastest

PGR3's coolest addition, however, has to be its in-car view. Using this setup on a large-enough TV, combined with feedback from the controller, makes it virtually indistinguishable from being in a real car. It's a highly enjoyable way to drive.

The basic single-player mode is rather short with an extension available online, which makes an Xbox Live Gold subscription somewhat necessary.

Call of Duty 2

The World War II first-person shooter has become a sub-genre unto itself on the backs of several very successful franchises, such as Medal of Honor and Brothers in Arms. Activision's Call of *Duty* is another, and the second game in the series is as impressive as its brethren.

In a new twist, players start out controlling a Russian soldier, defending the motherland from hordes of invading Nazis. The action is fast and furious, with relentless swarms of fascists constantly advancing on the Russians' positions.

As such, players will have to think fast and react even faster - there's

constant running, ducking for cover, and surprises around every corner. Some of the battle scenarios border on epic, such as having to defend a building from an enemy charge.

\$719 for full.

XBOX 360

selection.

Pros: Breath-taking

graphics; wireless

controllers; good game

Cons: High-definition

TV is needed for full

Price: \$549 for basic,

Herald rating: 9/10.

enjoyment; connecting

to PC takes time to set

In one instance, the Soviet unit hunkers down in a building and the player learns over the radio that a large number of enemies are advancing. So far, it's standard fare for firstperson shooters.

However, when the enemy wave crests the hill in front of the building with a loud and chilling war cry, you can't help but get shivers and fear for vour life. The game is full of moments like these.

Amped 3

2K Sports' latest snowboarding game, Amped 3, is perhaps the wackiest and most colourful of the 360 launch titles It's also a lot of fun. even for nonsnowboarding enthusiasts.

Amped 3 pretty well throws reality out the window and allows players to engage in all sorts of gravity-defying tricks on their way down the mountain. It's basically Tony Hawk, on snow

The rail slides, carving and huge jumps can all eventually become repetitive, but the game's amusing storvline and characters keep it

Ghost Recon Advanced

Warfighter

Every new console generally features one real "launch title" that basically sells the hardware. The latest Tom Clancy third-person military shooter from Ubisoft is definitely it for the 360. Advanced Warfighter is set in the

near future and puts the player in control of Captain Mitchell, leader of a specialised US military unit known as the Ghosts. The Ghosts have been plopped down in Mexico City to stop a coup d'etat, and fight off the rebel forces of a rogue general.

The storyline has all the intrigue and grit of a Tom Clancy novel and the action is hot and heavy. Players lead and command their squad through the streets of Mexico City in pursuit of different objectives, such as rescuing politicians, neutralising rebel bases and rescuing comrades.

The Ghosts are aided in their mission by some advanced technology, including infrared goggles and an "eye-in-the-sky" remote-control reconnaissance device. Players can issue advance and regroup orders to their squad and will

often come into control of armoured support, such as tanks, as well. They'll also engage in some rail-based shooting by manning a helicopter minigun.

Advanced Warfighter takes full advantage of the 360's graphics power, and can be said to be the best-looking console game ever. The game progresses over the course of a few days and missions take place during several times of day. Regardless of the time or lighting, however, the game looks absolutely photo-realistic. You

could almost swear you were playing a live-action movie. In the end, Advanced Warfighter is

as close to perfect as games get.



Nielsen//NetRatings NEW ZEALAND

TOP SITES NZ Users at home, week ending t	9 March 2006
1 xtramsn.co.nz	618,686
2 trademe.co.nz	554,414
3 xtra.co.nz	158,477
4 westpac.co.nz	112,283
5 asbbank.co.nz	88,083
6nationalbank.co.nz	84,811
7 nzherald.co.nz	79,377
8 stuff.co.nz	73,995
9 airnewzealand.co.nz	72,354
10 telecom.co.nz	69,718
Source Nielsen/NetRatings Marke 13 - 19 March 2005 Unique Browsers (current) home), Domestic Traffic	

At home on the net

This week's Nielsen//NetRatings ranking shows the top sites ranked by unique browsers accessing from home. A key difference is that home users are more likely to be visiting banking sites probably because of a perceived sense of privacy.

Also, Netwatch says, in the final quarter of 2005 just over one third of us used broadband from home. In Australia it was two out of three users.

All the talk in the office: Ricky Gervais the podcast king

HE hot new word in the tech world last year was "podcast" Well, the Oxford University Press seemed to think so. It actually named podcast the most significant new word of 2005.

It seemed like anyone with an internet connection and something to say got into podcasting last year. Even George W. Bush had a go.

Podcasts — or recordings of audio content downloadable to the computers and portable music players of listeners - started out as free bonus material given away to supplement TV shows, massage egos or accommodate

the overflow of radio babble For the first year, everyone struggled to build a business model that would make podcasting eventually pay. Yet no one managed to come up with a podcast attractive



PETER GRIFFIN web walk

enough to have web surfers reach for their credit cards in sufficient numbers.

Who would have thought the fledgling premium market would have been given its biggest boost by an overweight, middle-aged British

comedian? That's right, Ricky Gervais creator of the hugely successful TV show The Office - is now the podcast king, credited with bringing

podcasting to the mainstream with his downloadable programme, The Ricky Gervais Show (www.guardian.co.uk/ rickygervais).

The podcasts of the show, which has Gervais, his writing partner Stephen Merchant and eccentric producer Karl Pilkington engaged in inane but hilarious conversation for half an hour at a time, emerged in December as a sort of experiment by

the Guardian newspaper. Incidentally, with Guardian Unlimited, the paper has one of the

best free news websites in the world Posted on the Guardian site and available free for download, the episodes were so popular that by February they had been downloaded two million times. Downloads have

now passed the three million mark. On average, each episode was

downloaded 261,000 times, meaning more people were downloading Gervais' show than buying charttopping CD singles. Gervais was on to another winner and comedy was again his weapon. Gervais is now in the Guinness Book of Records for creating

the most popular podcast ever. After completing the first season of 12 episodes and taking stock of the

record-breaking download figures, Gervais and his cohorts decided to make the second series of the show premium content.

Obviously the new shows aren't as heavily downloaded, but they're still the best-selling podcasts in the world.

iTunes store, where they sell for 95 pence (\$2.65) per episode or £3.75 for a series subscription. It's also number one at audible.com, the website that

specialises in downloadable audio books and podcasts.

What started out as a bit of fun to keep Gervais' profile up while he develops a second series of his comedy TV show Extras has quickly turned into a thriving business venture.

Now it seems that Britain's radio deejays and comedians are salivating at the prospect of mirroring his

success. While The Ricky Gervais Show is the only major British comedy podcast to take the subscription route, there's

fierce competition among radio deejays and comedians battling it out in free download territory.

Most are not tailor-made for podcasting, but consist of the best clips from a week of radio deejay shows. That's certainly the case for popular Virgin Radio deejay Christian

O'Connell (www.virginradio.co.uk/ djsshows/shows/breakfast/ podcast.hyml) who supplements his 30-minute, best-of podcast each week with some unbroadcast content.

His rival at the BBC, Radio 1's breakfast host Chris Moyles (www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/chrismoyles) has delved into podcasts with weekly

But at BritPod.com a panel of hosts engage in comedic chat specifically for

(comedy365.co.uk), which has now racked up more than a million podcast downloads and delivers a mix of dirty jokes and humorous banter several

The trend is mirrored in the United States where the Onion Radio News (www.theonion.com/content/

radionews) and The Dawn and Drew Show are two of the better comedy podcasts available for free download.

For some reason, comedy seems to be ideally suited to the podcast format. These podcasts are generally brief — 20 to 30 minutes long, which equates to 20 to 30 megabytes as an MP3 download.

At that size the download isn't too much of a strain on your broadband connection but the programme is long enough to last the morning commute to work and hopefully funny enough to have you arriving at work in a good mood

Gervais, a self-confessed luddite, is now working on having his show formatted so it can be downloaded as a podcast to mobile smartphones such as Pocket PC devices and Palm Treo. peter@petergriffin.co.nz

highlights of his own radio chat show.

podcast. There's also Comedy 365

times a week

The episodes top the sales on the