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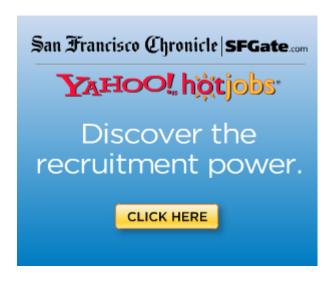
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Microsoft puts on its game face
New Xbox isn't just loaded with features, it's
the most powerful console ever

- Alex Lau, Chronicle Staff Critic Wednesday, November 14, 2001





When Microsoft unveils Xbox, its first video game console, tomorrow, all eyes will be on the mean green and black machine.

The Xbox is an X-factor, considering Microsoft is a newbie to the gaming business. No one know how it will do against tried-and-true players like Sony and Nintendo. But Microsoft is armed and ready to go with the most powerful console ever made and killer launch apps to boot.

When you take your shiny new Xbox for a spin, its size and weight may surprise you.

The big black box, or clear green debug unit that Microsoft sent for review,

resembles industrial-grade home audio-video equipment. Comparing the Xbox to Nintendo's GameCube would be like comparing David to Goliath. But some comparison is inevitable, since Nintendo will come out with its new platform three days after the Xbox.

The Xbox will sell for a hefty \$299. It comes chock full of features like a built-in Ethernet port and an 8 gigabyte hard drive that won't be found on the lower-priced GameCube, which retails for \$199. In fact, the Xbox is the first system to have an integrated hard drive. It will allow games to load faster, and when the Xbox goes online, gamers can download extra levels, characters and other options that will add value to games. If you're one of those people that have to have the latest and greatest, then the Xbox

is the system for you.

On the front of the Xbox, you will find two buttons: power and eject. The system uses the sliding-tray design like PlayStation 2. Four controller ports line the system face, which will allow for multiplayer and competitive games.

The Xbox controller may be difficult to use for kids or gamers with small hands. It is quite large and cumbersome to hold. Microsoft's controller features two analog sticks and a traditional d-pad. There are 10 buttons, two of which are shoulder-mounted. Also, the controller comes with two slots to hold memory cards and other accessories. But Microsoft wins big ingenuity points for including a breakaway connection point on its 10-foot-long controller cord. This prevents klutzy gamers from toppling over Xboxes.

Xbox games will use standard DVDs that can potentially hold as much as 18 gigabytes of data. That's monstrous compared with GameCube's 1.5-gigabyte mini- DVD. And to answer the question

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everyone has been asking: Xbox can play DVD movies, but you'll have to plunk down \$30 more for a remote control.

The Xbox also comes with handy features like the hard-drive manager, which lets gamers check disk space and transfer files. A more controversial feature is the parental control option, which allows concerned parents to enter a code to stop their kids from playing selected DVD movies and games.

But the niftiest feature that the Xbox sports is the CD ripper, where you pop in a CD, copy the tracks to the hard drive and make your own custom music mixes.

Landing the popular fighting game Dead or Alive 3 was a minor coup for the folks in Redmond, Wash. DOA3 is basically DOA2 with a major graphic makeover. The control scheme, characters and indeed a majority of the moves remain unchanged in this latest installment. Although lacking in innovation, DOA3 does offer some splendid backdrops in the fighting arenas.

The Xbox's flagship launch title is Halo. This immersive first-person shooter is a blast to play. Employing the tried-and-true formula of a futuristic soldier battling hordes of aliens bent on the destruction of humanity, Halo combines intuitive controls with immense alien environments to great effect. Along with the lush graphics and stunning soundtrack, one of the best features of this game is the constant interaction between friend and foe alike. Gamers can hear other marines talking smack and aliens laughing at their plight. Halo is worth checking out.

Innovation in video games seems to be determined not by hardware anymore but by the games themselves. Halo reinvents the wheel because it employs every button on a controller in a seamless fashion, which is rare, and it provides a strong sense of world building with its ambience and compelling story. These are elements sorely lacking in sequels that are popping up on PS2 and Xbox that mask their sameness with a new coat of gloss.

The Sony PS2 is the clear favorite to win again, but the Xbox could be a spoiler. However, it won't be easy. Microsoft may have played its cards right by creating a console that is both powerful and developer-friendly, but it still lacks the extensive third-party support that Sony has. Xbox is entering the fray with fists flying, but it remains to be seen whether Microsoft will turn the Xbox into Xbucks.

Xbox at a glance

On sale: Thursday

Price: \$299, includes one controller and standard A/V cable

CPU: 733 MHz Intel Pentium III chip

Graphics Processor: 233 MHz custom chip developed by Microsoft and Nvidia

Features: CD-ROM/DVD-ROM drive, DVD video player (can be accessed by remote control sold separately for \$29.99), Ethernet port/broadband adapter, 8 gigabyte hard drive

Additional Xbox controller: \$39.99

Eight-megabyte memory unit: \$34.99

Games: \$49.99.

Source: Chronicle staff

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