

VIDEOGAME

THE TOM TOM'S COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO CHOOSING THE GAME CONSOLE THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

By Sean Beverly

As the holiday gift giving (and receiving) season approaches, only one question is running rampant through gamer's minds across the world: what game console should I ask for this year?

Choosing the console that fits your gaming style can be one of the most difficult decisions a gamer has to make. Not only are Microsoft, Nintendo, and Sony offering next-generation consoles in stores now, but they are all relatively matched in graphical prowess and software support.

So how do you decide which game console is right for your particular tastes? The process can be as simple or as scientific as you are willing to make it.

One must take into account the purposes that the console will be used for, whether you prefer games with engrossing single-player experiences, or are more of a social gamer who prefers to go head-to-head with three of your closest friends. Some consoles are geared more towards single-player gameplay, while others are aimed at multiplayer mayhem.

The next step you must take in the decision-making process is to take a look at the software available for each console. So-called "killer apps," are the games that represent the best of what each console has to offer. The Nintendo Gamecube offers classic franchises such as Mario, Metroid, and Zelda. The Microsoft Xbox serves up fresh, innovative titles from up-and-coming developers such as

Halo and Splinter Cell. There's something for everyone on the PlayStation 2, from newly established franchises such as Grand Theft Auto to some of your old favorites, such as the Final Fantasy series, which is now in its tenth incarnation in the United States with plans for online play next year.

If you're a fan of certain game series', you should be sure to check that its various incarnations are available, or will be available on your console of choice in the near future. While many franchises are moving to all three platforms, such as the formerly Sony-exclusive Crash Bandicoot series, some of the most influential franchises remain platform-specific. Mario and his Nintendo-created friends will continue to make their home on the Gamecube, and you can forget about seeing Grand Theft Auto anywhere but the PlayStation 2 for the next year. And if you're looking for games by famous developer Rare, you'll find them only on Xbox, thanks to a recent buy-out by Microsoft.

If price is an issue, you'll have to be very careful about what console you choose. The initial cost of ownership for some consoles is lower than others, but games and accessories can quickly make your investment a hefty one. Each console will have its share of older games that will be priced lower than brand new games, such as Sony's "Greatest Hits" collection for the PlayStation 2. If you're on a budget, you may want to take a look at these games before moving into the high-profile new titles.

Be objective, and you'll make the correct decision for your gaming tastes. If you need further counseling, look below for our guide to the key features of the Microsoft Xbox, Sony PlayStation 2, and Nintendo Gamecube.

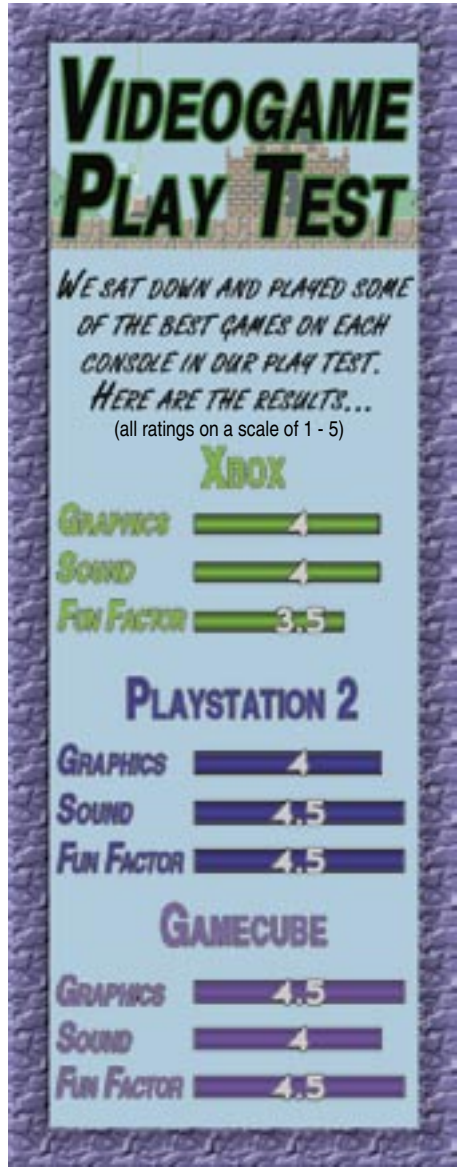


Photo by Sean Beverly

10 staff members rated Gamecube, Xbox, and PlayStation 2 in a play test.



Price: \$199.99

■ **Key Games:**

- Halo
- Sega GT 2002
- Madden 2003
- Splinter Cell

■ **Selling Points:**

- Built-in hard drive for game saves and downloadable game extras.
- Xbox Live for online play in certain games for users with broadband connections.
- DVD playback with purchase of DVD remote (\$29.99).
- Ability to link consoles for network play.

■ **Buy it if you...**

like multiplayer games. The Xbox has the most solid multiplayer lineup of all the major consoles. When your friends aren't around to share the fun with, you can continue your multiplayer games online through Xbox Live, Microsoft's online gaming network for the Xbox.

Price: \$199.99

■ **Key Games:**

- Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty
- Gran Turismo 3
- Grand Theft Auto: Vice City
- Final Fantasy X

■ **Selling Points:**

- Huge selection of games.
- Online play available with purchase of network adaptor for users with broadband and dial-up internet connections.
- DVD playback out of box.
- Ability to link consoles for network play.
- Plays original PlayStation games.

■ **Buy it if you...**

are more of a lone gamer. The system only has two controller ports out-of-the-box (a multitap can be purchased separately), and currently has only very limited online support. The console's strengths lie in its extensive selection of excellent single player games, and huge third party developer support.

Price: \$149.99

■ **Key Games:**

- Super Mario Sunshine
- Metroid Prime
- Super Smash Bros. Melee
- Resident Evil Zero

■ **Selling Points:**

- Least expensive console.
- New games from all popular Nintendo franchises.
- Online play for broadband and dial-up users coming soon via separate adaptors.
- Most appeal to younger gamers.
- Software developers offering more mature titles, such as Resident Evil Zero

■ **Buy it if You...**

want a good all-around gaming experience. With an equal split between quick, fun multiplayer games and engrossing single-player experiences, the Gamecube is very balanced. Don't buy it, however, if you're interested in online gaming. Very little support has been announced for the console's network adaptor.