

AGENTS OF CHANGE

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Next-gen consoles: More than just gaming hardware

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The middle of November saw some of the quickest ecommerce website crashes in recent memory. Hundreds of thousands of gamers looking to cop a next gen console flooded the likes of Walmart, Amazon, and other prominent retail chains. The target? A next-gen console.

Gamers were no strangers to this phenomenon by this time. 2020 has been a year of the dreaded "Out of Stock" message flashing across disappointed customers' screens. We had the paper launch of Nvidia's RTX 3000 series graphics cards, followed soon by AMD's 6000 series GPUs and 5000 series CPUs. The global pandemic has confined people to their homes and as a result, the demand for gaming hardware has skyrocketed. The stock issues were further exacerbated by logistical issues that arose because of restrictive measures taken by countries as well freight companies. While the Xbox Series X stock has somewhat stabilised, the PlayStation 5 still remains elusive. These circumstances have also spawned a different breed of evil: the scalpers. With bots and clever scripts, these heinous beings buy massive chunks of stock from retailers, only to flip the products at double the price to third-party sellers. Scalping is such a big issue right now, that even brick-and-mortar retailers in our country are engaging in it. Don't believe me? Take note of how that random friend fidgets every time you ask them the price of their PS5. That's them trying to hide their shame of having no self-control.

In the event that you do manage to cop one at retail price, congratulations! You are literally one of the lucky few in the world. But is the entire experience worth it?

To answer this question we need to roll back to 2013 when the PlayStation 4 launched and the 8th generation of console wars officially began. Both the XB1 and PS4 had a modest number of titles, and few were worth playing. It was a future-proofing purchase rather

than one of instant-gratification. If you got the new console, you could assume you'd be safe for at least the next five years for all your gaming needs. The 8th generation truly shined during the years 2015 to 2018, with both platforms pumping out must-play exclusives all the while offering vast ecosystems to entice users into spending more time in their systems.

This will be the case for the 9th generation as well. As of now, barring all the multiplatform titles, there's literally nothing to play on the next-gen consoles. Once you're done with Demon's Souls, you're going to be stuck playing backwards compatibility games from the PS4's library. We cannot be certain as to whether there will be a golden age for this generation as well but we can opt to consult certain facts.

It is clear that both Microsoft and Sony want to cater to the growing technically-proficient gamer base who consider PC the platform of their choice. This trend started with the mid-generation hardware refresh during the PS4 and XB1 lifespan. The

PS4 Pro and XB1X were both aimed at delivering higher fidelity visuals and better performance—hallmarks of the PC platform.



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PS4 Pro and XB1X were both aimed at delivering higher fidelity visuals and better performance—hallmarks of the PC platform. With the 9th generation of consoles, they have opted to go down a similar path by heavily advertising one of the most polarising features of modern-day PC gaming, Ray Tracing.

Ray Tracing was touted by Nvidia at the onset as the next step in the evolution of graphics in video games. Real-time ray tracing was a pipe dream for hardware manufacturers for the longest time imaginable. Nvidia made it mainstream with their RTX 2000 series GPUs. The first generation of ray tracing was generally a horrible mess in terms of performance. It still is, given how it requires raw computational power to function well. Nvidia's DLSS upscaling has circumvented that performance

requirement, but AMD is yet to catch up.

Which brings me to my next point: all the next-gen consoles have AMD graphics hardware, and if the 6000 series is any indication, they are nowhere near breaking Nvidia's performance numbers when it comes to ray tracing. But given this fact alone that the console manufacturers have promoted graphics features that were once thought to be exclusive to PC, does mean that they are serious about bringing proper next-gen experiences to these consoles.

The handful of exclusives that have been released on both consoles have a variety of settings for different graphical fidelities. A user can choose smoother framerates while sacrificing visual quality and resolution or vice versa. The hardware in the consoles is just not powerful enough to deliver 4K or even

1440p 60 FPS with full raytracing, but neither can most PCs unless you spend a fortune so there's that.

But all of this flies in the face of what made consoles vastly popular in the first place—a seamless experience. Gone are those days when you could just pop in a disk (or a cartridge if you prefer) and you could just play the game. Now, you're going to have to wait for frequent updates. The new SSDs on the consoles hoped to reduce loading and installation times, but they can't upgrade your internet unfortunately. What will ultimately happen is that consoles will struggle to find their own identity in a market that is already highly competitive because of shrinking wallets.

As platforms become homogeneous, gamers will face what I like to call the commodity dilemma. Think of when you're in the market to buy a bag of rice, generally you'd just pick whichever one's at the top without giving a second thought, right? That is the future we might be looking at with consoles as well. With a vast majority of gamers flocking to live service multiplayer games that are cross-platform, your platform of choice simply won't matter. Unless, of course, you are part of the niche who want to go for particular franchises which are exclusive to a platform. Graphics and performance have always been better on PC, trying to make it mainstream might just be a bit too much of a stretch for consoles yet again.

No doubt there will be a vast library of jaw-dropping titles to experience on these platforms after one or two years, but simply put, the next generation of consoles have a lot to live up to given how they have basically entered a market that has been dominated by one platform for years on end. Only time will tell if the 9th generation will be the one that finally breaks the stalemate or will it be just a repeat of 8th gen.

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