

Technology

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Home Entertainment: The Next Generation

As next-gen formats fight for market dominance, you can still upgrade your old system before committing to the next big thing.

There's the new high-definition media format, Blu-ray, to be launched this year in head-to-head competition with the recently introduced HD DVD format backed by Toshiba (TOSBF). Meantime, electronics makers are unveiling respective next-gen gaming consoles: the PlayStation 3 from the world's No.1 game-hardware seller, Sony (SNE), and Nintendo's newly rechristened Wii. Both will do battle against Microsoft's (MSFT) Xbox 360, out since November.

PICKING THE WINNER. For some, the proliferation of choices is turning out to be a headache. Many wonder which media format will prevail, and how compatible either will be with existing, or soon-to-be-purchased, home-entertainment systems.

At least there's good news for those who want to their games and DVD players to work together. Sony-backed Blu-ray drives will be hardwired into the PS3. Microsoft, which has thrown its weight behind Toshiba's HD DVD format, plans to sell a device that links Xbox 360 to HD DVD players. A Blu-ray equipped PS3 at \$500 or \$600 or an Xbox 360 at \$300 or \$400 with an HD DVD add-on is a relatively low-risk way to dip a toe into next-gen media formats.

As for Nintendo's Wii, it won't play either of the next-generation media formats. Still, Nintendo has promised the console won't cost more than \$250 in the U.S., so it's a low-risk way to play on, even if it leaves the gamer stuck in the current generation of video gear.

HEDGE YOUR BETS. And what about folks who want to upgrade the rest of an aging entertainment system? There's a slew of choices in high-tech home entertainment that won't lock the buyer into either format. Products like Yamaha's YSP-1000, a single-component surround-sound system, will go well with any TV setup.

Whatever the safeguards, fence-sitting is inevitable for some. Adrienne Downey of Phoenix (Ariz.)-based Semico Research expects the Blu-ray format to win out eventually. Still, that doesn't mean she's going to march right out and buy a Blu-ray player as soon as it's available. For those who can't wait, but want to play it safe, Downey counsels caution. It's sensible advice in a consumer electronics space that's swiftly crowding with choice.

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