

PlayStation 3 review

by Ben Kuchera

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The monolith has landed



Sony PlayStation 3 60GB

Manufacturer: Sony

Price: \$599 ([shop for this item](#))

There it is, sitting in my entertainment center: the PlayStation 3. Getting my PS3 was surprisingly easy—no long preorder line—and when the system was released I arrived at 8:00am and picked it up. Simple. I wasn't shot at and there wasn't a lot of fuss. It sounds like I was one of the lucky ones.

It's just sitting there: a big black monolith with the little light blinking at me. When I took it out of the packaging, I wanted to start singing the theme from *2001*.

This is what Sony has been hyping for the past two years, what is supposed to begin the high definition era, and what is intended to destroy the competition. This is the Trojan horse by which Sony hopes to get Blu-ray into as many homes as possible. The stakes are much higher than for a simple gaming system; this is a format war for the home theater of tomorrow. It is also the first time Sony has gotten serious about online play, and they're hoping you're going to want to buy a lot of content through their new system. Sony has a lot riding on the PS3... but you know that already.

Given the long lines, the campouts, and the \$600 price tag, the PS3 has high expectations to live up to. The press hasn't exactly been kind to Ken Kutaragi's hyperbole and some of the design and strategy decisions they've made with the system, but consumers are still loyal to the Sony and PlayStation names. Microsoft is hoping Sony drops the ball, and Nintendo has decided the best way to win is to play a different game altogether; their low-cost system relies more on a unique control scheme than the laundry list of features that Sony is hoping will interest gamers.



With all the words printed about it and all the hand-wringing from both sides, we finally get to play with it. So let's hook it up and go for a ride.

This is what you get when you mess with us

The system comes in the standard Sony-looking box, and the pack-ins leave a little to be desired. You get composite cables standard, which lets you hook the system up to an HDTV, but you'll be limited to 480i. If you want 720p or better, you're going to need to purchase a set of component cables or an HDMI cable. This isn't that great of a start. If Sony was serious about this being a true high-definition system, making standard definition the default when you open your system seems an odd choice. Then again, it keeps the costs down.

You get a [Sixaxis](#) controller and a USB cable to charge it through the system. Sony also gives you a network cable in case you don't feel like using the WiFi. The first few batches of the system will also feature *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* on Blu-ray to get you used to using your machine as a movie player. It's not the movie I would have asked for, but free is free.

The system itself is huge, and with its shiny black exterior it's very impressive looking. The discs slide into the system directly, with no loading tray needed. The eject and power buttons lay flush with the system. You simply put your finger on them and they work. If nothing else, it all certainly *looks* expensive. To the left of the disc slot you get a little flap that lifts up to reveal ports for CF, SD, and Pro Duo memory sticks. Below that are four USB ports. If you have it, odds are you can hook it up to the PS3.



The buttons lay flush with the system

Upon hookup, it's hard not to be amazed at how quiet it is. I can hardly tell it's on. Contrast that with the Harrier-jet sounds of the 360 when it starts to work, and you have a very appealing system in both looks and sound. Of course, it could always have been smaller, but you also don't have the huge power supply to deal with like you do with the 360. Sony giveth, and Sony taketh away.



Rear view with ports

It's a lot like the PSP in that it's an impressive, almost imposing piece of hardware. You'll certainly know it's there when you put it in your home theater set-up.

Because seven axes would be way too many

Sony decided to play it safe with the controller and simply make the Dual Shock 3. Since that name would have been a little depressing, they decided to go with the Sixaxis instead.



The Sixaxis has its pluses and minuses. Let's start with the weight. Since Sony famously removed the rumble function from their controllers instead of paying Immersion for the technology, the new controllers are very light. While they may feel cheap at first, during an extended playing session, it's very comfortable. While I miss the satisfying heft of the 360 controllers, this isn't bad. My Sixaxis does have an issue where the two halves meet though, causing an uncomfortable ridge to run down both sides of the controller.



The other difference is that two of the shoulder buttons have been replaced with triggers that mimic the Xbox controller's configuration. This allows for finer control when playing driving games and the like. It's an odd feeling from a PlayStation controller, and they push in a little further than I thought they would, making it almost feel broken. It's odd, but I got used to it.

The lack of rumble didn't bother me much once I started playing, but I am noticing that the motion-sensing capabilities of the controller are underutilized with many of the launch games. They may have you shaking the controller to get away from an enemy, and the Motorstorm demo allows you to steer with the motion-sensing controls if you're feeling suicidal, but I didn't find any of the uses very impressive. [Blast Factor](#), a game you can buy from the online Sony store, allows you to tilt the controller to send a wave from one side of the board to the other, but even that felt gimmicky. I hope that future games use the technology in more satisfying ways. Right now, it just feels like a cheap Wii knock-off. That's not to say that it won't be great in the future, but so far there is not much here to give us a lot of hope.

If it ain't broke, it probably doesn't need fixing, so Sony just kept its classic controller design. The motion-sensing aspects probably just need room to grow, or they simply may be cast aside as gimmick by developers. Only time will tell in that regard.

If it works for an HDTV, it'll work for a PS3

I have mixed feelings about the user interface. First, it's the PSP UI, so if you know your way around that system you'll have no problem here. The XMB system—as Sony calls it—has been popping up in more and more of their gadgets. Sony is once again going back to a stock solution for a new problem, and overall it works. It's easy to find what you're looking for, and as you download demos and put in discs, the options to use them show up under the correct heading.

The only problem is that with even moderate use the screen can get a little messy; am I really going to have to see every demo I've downloaded when the cursor is on the "Game" heading? Will every movie trailer pop up when I'm on the "Video" heading? There's no real way to hide these things, so it can get a little cluttered. I can't imagine how long those lines will get with long-term use.

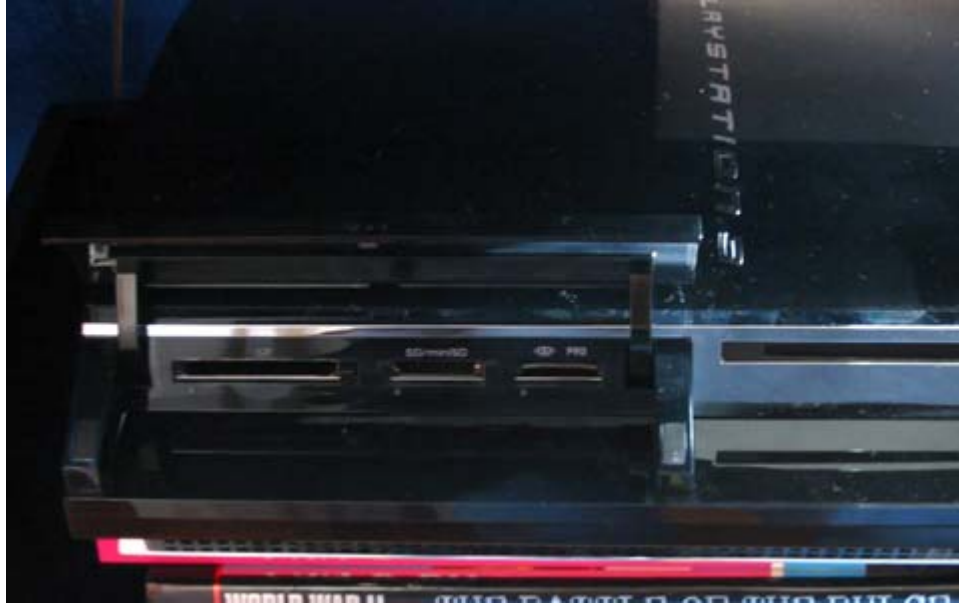
It's simple, it's intuitive, but it certainly isn't elegant or even pretty. I really wish they would have come up with something that's PS3-specific, but of course that takes time and money. This isn't a bad solution, but it certainly isn't the ideal one.



Yeah, that's easy to use. The yellow square is thoughtfully titled "yellow"

Plug it in and hope it's the right file type

On the \$600 system configuration, you'll notice you can move content and files from any of three different kinds of media sticks: CF, SD, and Pro Duo cards. Here is a hint about using memory cards and USB devices on your PS3: the system can have trouble seeing some folders when you simply plug in your device, so what you're going to want to do is to highlight the stick, hit the triangle button, which will bring up a menu on the right-hand side of the screen, and then select "Display All." This will let you explore all the folders, and will make using devices like iPods much easier. This isn't something I've seen addressed anywhere else, so if you're getting frustrated trying to find where the files are on your device if the PS3 doesn't see them, this should fix that problem.



You get your choice of three card readers in the premium version

But what exactly can you dump onto the system? First, you can bring your digital pictures from your camera by either putting in the memory stick directly, or simply plugging it into a USB port. The PS3 has some nice slide-show features, as well as a 3D visualization option that gives you a virtual tabletop and then your pictures flutter down as Polaroids. It's hard to describe—and almost entirely useless—but it's pretty cool.



The slideshow visualization is rather nice

You can also move your music files onto the system to listen to, although the included software for playback is kind of shallow. You can rip your own CDs, and the PS3 will go online and get you album information, but you can't make playlists and while the visualization software has some nifty elements, it's nothing that Winamp doesn't do better. I was hoping for something fun here, or at least interactive like the Xbox 360, but as it stands it's more of a bullet point than a feature you'll use your PS3 for.



The music player interface, utilitarian and sparse

I also noticed that none of the games I've played so far support custom soundtracks; the fact that every 360 game can do this and Sony seemingly doesn't prioritize it is kind of annoying. I keep feeling like I'm losing features.

Ripping CDs to the PS3 hard drive is zippy and you are given a wide array of choices in terms of file type and quality. I don't have a lot of complaints in that area. Well done there.

In terms of video, you can move video files to your PS3's hard drive through USB or by dumping it from your memory stick, although the PS3 will only support a few file types this way. Here's the list:

- MPEG-4 SP (AAC LC)
- H.264/MPEG-4 AVC Main Profile(AAC LC)
- MPEG-1 (MPEG Audio Layer 2)
- MPEG-2 PS(MPEG2 Audio Layer 2)
- MPEG-2 TS (MPEG2 Audio Layer 2)

If you want to take the guesswork out of converting your files for play on the PS3, simply download [PS3 Video 9](#), a free program that will do all the heavy lifting for you. Depending on the speed of your computer though, converting video can be something of a long process.

All this is kind of a pain in the butt; I would kill someone in front of their mother if the PS3 and the Xbox 360 would simply support DivX files. I know why they don't—piracy would be way too easy (and of course Sony loves proprietary formats)—but this feature has to be at the top of everyone's wish list. Maybe almost as high as background downloading, in fact, but more on that later.

This is starting to be a theme for the PS3: some great features that are hindered by poor software support. With a more robust music player the PS3 would make a great jukebox for your home entertainment center. With DivX support and the ability to stream content from your PC it would have made a great HTPC for your living room. As it stands, there is a lot of mediocrity here. I want to see some updates for these functions soon, and when those start coming you can go ahead and start adding points to our final score.

They say it'll get smart. They left out that fact that it started slow

After you unbox your PS3, it may take you a while before you go online to see what Sony is offering in terms of digital distribution. First, you have to download a system update. That's right; out of the box the PS3 requires an update just to get online. Fun, isn't it? So that'll take a few minutes, after which you have to install the update. This is getting tedious. Then you're going to need an account, and if you don't have a USB keyboard lying around to help you set this up, you're in trouble. With a USB keyboard, it's a snap though, and I quickly set up an account.



Without a keyboard, text entry is tedious

It's easy to look at what's being offered in the Sony store, and there are a good amount of game demos to choose from if you want to try some games before you buy. I have been a big *Motorstorm* fan ever since I played it at E3, so I grabbed that demo first. It brings up the download screen... with a progress bar. My stomach sank; the only other option was a "Cancel" button. You've got to be kidding me; the system doesn't have background downloading? I can't watch a Blu-ray movie or play a game while it grabs my demo? Lame. I stuck it out though, and I noticed that it took way too long to finish the download.



Time to leave and do something else; there's no background downloading

My problem is that the online service seems slow. When I would choose something to look at, the system would freeze for a few seconds until the page came up. I'm not sure why this is. There aren't that many PS3s out in the wild. I even checked my network to see if there was anything that could be slowing down the PS3's download. Nope, nothing coming down the pipes. It really is that slow. It took me about three hours to download an 800MB file, and that's just ridiculous. There aren't that many systems out there, so we know the pipes aren't clogged. Why is this so slow?

The UI also seems as if it were designed for a computer. It uses a cursor you control with the analogue stick, and there is no easy way to zip around menus with the controller. After a few updates, the Xbox 360 Marketplace is designed perfectly for their controller, but Sony seems to be happy hoping at some point you'll just give up and use a mouse.

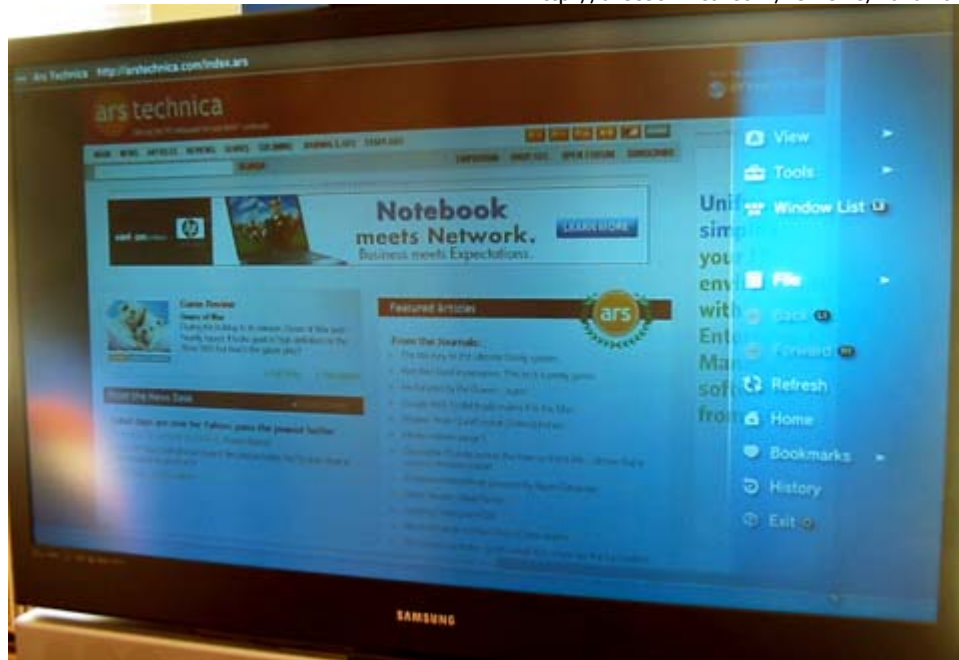


The PlayStation Store, after the system was able to render all the pictures.

It's pretty easy to find what you're looking for once you get past the control issues, and with the 60GB hard drive in the high-end system Sony has a good head start to begin selling music and movies to people, but they really need to tighten this thing up. It needs to run much smoother, and Sony needs to add background downloading. This isn't an option, this is something they needed to have launched with; having your system be locked down when you're grabbing a demo or some video is pretty much inexcusable. When the Xbox 360 launched without background downloading, it was annoying. Sony's not learning from Microsoft's mistake is just plain bad.

One last complaint. While Sony's system uses actual dollar amounts, not points, you have to manually add money to your "wallet" to buy something. I wanted to buy Blast Factor for \$7.99. I clicked on the game, told the system I wanted to buy it, and was told I didn't have enough money in my wallet. Okay, so I had to go add money to my wallet, and then go back and finish checkout on the game. This took way too many screens and way too much time. Then of course I had to download and install it, and while this was happening I couldn't do anything else. It wasn't an intuitive process, and it certainly wasn't fun. While the 360 Marketplace makes buying things almost too easy, Sony really makes you work for it.

I've had problems with downloads not finishing on the PS3, and I haven't been able to resume interrupted downloads. That's irritating, but I'm hoping that the dropped downloads are due to the quirks of the first day of the system.



The browser is far from intuitive

You can browse the Internet with the included browser, but that browser is something of a confusing mess. It took me a while to figure out how to even surf over to Ars, and that isn't the mark of something that's easy to use. In addition to not being terribly user friendly, browser is also slow, like everything else online-related. Why is the online experience so subpar with this system?

You'll still need your PS2 for *Guitar Hero*

One of the major draws of this system is the fact you can trade in your PS2 when you get it; the PS3 can use all your PS2 and PSone games. Of course, there is no PS2 controller port, so you can't use your guitar controller for *Guitar Hero*, but over than that you should be golden. After hearing that the system had problems with *Gran Turismo 4*, I decided to check that title too.

You won't need your PS2 memory cards any more. The PS3 creates an internal memory card on your drive and saves the games there. Nice. If you want to move your existing saved games over, there is an adaptor available.

We didn't expect any graphical updates to the games, and we didn't get them. Still, it is nice to only need one system for all my PlayStation needs, and the Sixaxis works well as a wireless controller. Of course, no rumble, so games like *Metal Gear Solid*—where rumble was a large part of the experience—may lose something, but overall this is pretty nice. I did enjoy playing *Gran Turismo 4* again in 1080i; it's so pretty.

One problem I do have is that the system doesn't reset itself when you eject a disc. Every other system on the market does that, so why doesn't the PS3? When the disc pops out, it should assume I don't want to play anymore instead of making me go back to the UI with the PS3 button. This is a minor quibble, but it seems like an obvious feature to add. Also, you'll have to hit the PS3 button to reconnect your controller between games, which is just lame. A more seamless experience would have been enjoyable.

Still, you're basically getting a free PS2 with your PS3. I just wish they had spent some more time making the experience a little more effortless.

The Trojan horse has some very real soldiers inside

A lot of people have argued—and not without merit—that the main reason for the PS3's existence is simply to get Blu-ray into your home. With most Blu-ray players starting at \$1,000, getting one for \$600 is a good deal, and you can even justify it somewhat by saying you're getting a PS3 for free. Or something—those are some funky economics for those of us who simply want to play games.

Blu-ray playback on the PS3 is about what you would expect from a console which has an impossible-to-find remote control. If you've ever used the PS2's DVD playback software, you'll feel right at home. For the rest of us, the controls will take a while to get used to.

In terms of visual quality, the Blu-ray player delivers. *Sahara* is crisp, colorful, and retains detail even in overly bright scenes. Take an up-close look at clothing in those bright scenes—you can still see the patterns clearly. *Good Night and Good Luck's* lighting and detail are phenomenal. You'll immediately know whether you're watching a studio scene or in someone's office just by the lighting differences. Skin, clothing, and hair detail remain the same, but take on different appearances based on the lighting. It's impressive. Talladega Nights? It's NASCAR in high def.

Alas, if you don't have a set that does 1080i or 1080p, you're going to be forced into 480p which is far less impressive. PS3's lack of a scaler bites it again. 720p output is not available on the titles we tested.

Sony's argument is that the \$600 price point is palatable because you're getting this new technology, and if you wanted a Blu-ray player that's a good point. From a pure game-playing standpoint, there's not a lot of added value in the Blu-ray drive. As more PS3 titles arrive that are too large to fit on a normal DVD appear, we'll appreciate the extra capacity of the Blu-ray drive a bit more.

All the features you expect to be are here—fast-forward, rewind, slow motion... It's not a bad player, and if you are interested in getting a Blu-ray machine, you could do a lot worse. The PS3 loads movies very quickly and looks great. In fact, after reading the reviews of some other Blu-ray players, this seems like the one to get. Whether or not you were looking to upgrade from your DVD player is another question entirely.

Game reviews:

Resistance: Fall of Man

This is the game that Sony is hoping gets everyone talking; the answer to both *Gears of War* and hopefully *Halo 3*. While I don't think *Resistance: Fall of Man* trumps *Gears of War*, it is certainly a great game, and a good way to kick off a new system. In this world, World War II never happened; a force of strange mutants called the Chimera has taken over Europe, and it's the job of an American soldier to try to take it back. It's an interesting premise, and the voice-over narration does a good job of keeping you intrigued as it feeds you hints about what's coming next.



It's a good-looking game, and early on when you get to drive a tank and blow the living hell out of everything in sight, you'll appreciate the physics and explosion effects. The weapons are well done, although there isn't anything you haven't seen before, which is a pretty good way to sum up the whole experience. *Resistance* isn't trying to reinvent the wheel, but what it does, it does well. I enjoyed the world, a "realistic" war game with an alien and strange enemy is a pretty cool idea, and I was glad to see something that wasn't *Call of Honor* or *Medal of Duty*... or whatever they're calling those games these days.



The online play supports up to 40 players, although since every PS3 is now on eBay waiting to be purchased I could only find one or two people at a time to play with. The friends list does work well with this game, and I'm hoping other PS3 games use the friends list this well.

While not explosively awesome, this is a very competent and enjoyable first-person shooter. Highly recommended.

Mobile Suit Gundam: Crossfire

The only excuse I can come up with for this game is that it simply wasn't done. When everyone in the room remarks on how jerky the graphics are in the first scene, you have problems. The animations are terrible, the frame rates uneven, and the voice acting is mediocre at best.

Basically, you stumble around and kind of aim at other big robots, and after a while either you die or they do. You can experiment with different mobile suits and grab some upgrades, but no matter how many times you level up or how powerful you get, the basic game play and graphics are still flawed.

There isn't anything to like here; I don't think even fans of the show will want to suffer through this mess. If the graphics were pretty we could at least write it off as a tech demo, but as it stands not only are 360 graphics better, but some PS2 games even look and move better than this. It is in high definition, sure, but making the sucky graphics sharp just makes... well, the sucky graphics look sharper.



My friend and I gave this a shot for a long session on Saturday afternoon, and after the first few play-throughs it became painful. It felt like work, and while technically it *is* work for me, it shouldn't feel like it. If

you were paid to review this game I feel bad for you; you're going to have a bad day at the office. If you bought this game at retail, I beg you to take it back and get something else. Anything else.

Remember when the PS2 launched with *Orphen*? Yeah, this is worse than that. I'm embarrassed that this was even released as a retail product, and no one punched me in the store when I asked for it.

Oh well, whenever something would happen, or we died, we all yelled "Gundamnit!" really loud. That was kind of fun. Hearing someone say, in all seriousness, "Use your machine-gun eyes!" just brings home how ridiculous this game is.



Conclusion

I think my main problem with the PS3 is that philosophically, it's a confused system. It doesn't really know what it wants to do. The 360 wants to be a social system; it wants to get you online, talking to people, playing this fun little minigames, and going for the high score and bragging rights. It wants to bring you together and make you remember what you love about gaming.

The Wii wants to get you off the couch, for you to be physical and to be part of this game world. Wii wants you to connect and to get your friends and family involved even if they don't like games. The Xbox 360 and Wii are systems that know what they want to do.

The PS3 doesn't have any grand ideas; Sony wanted something high-tech, so they started from scratch with the processor and GPU, but what does it get them? Very little so far. The controller is a mash-up of ideas from their old systems, the 360's triggers, and the Wii's motion-sensing capabilities, but once it has that tech it doesn't really know what to do with it. The Blu-ray adds cost, but adds very little to the gaming experience for the user. It's great as a media player, but for those of us who love games first and foremost, we have to look at it skeptically. The PS3 is a system with no core message, and that is what keeps it from being elegant. Will it do great things in the future? I hope so, the possibility and potential are certainly there. For now, it's power looking for a mission statement.

One significant issue with the PS3 is a lack of proper scaling. We know that if your HDTV can't display 720p, you will get knocked down to 480p in some games, which is a shame. The other problem shows itself in Blu-ray movies, with the system having trouble scaling things down from 1080p if your set doesn't support that resolution. In some instances, this results in a grainy image. Hopefully this can be addressed via a software update.

Sony wants to push new formats; we want to play great games and have a good time doing it. We want every bit of that experience, from the menus to the loading times, to help us get into that fantasy world and keep us there. Sadly, with all the new technology, Sony appears to have neglected the overall gaming experience to a degree.

Overall, I am impressed with the system's potential. The graphics power is there and once developers have had the time to tap into it, things should change a bit. In fact, I think we'll see great things from the second generation of games from the PS3. Combine that with a few software upgrades, better HD scaling, and a major overhaul of the online system and you can go ahead and add two points to the current score, three if Sony really delivers with the updates. The hardware is solid, and the games are only going to get better, but the software implementation leaves a lot to be desired; the score reflects the PlayStation 3 as it exists now.

The Good:

- The hardware looks great, and runs nearly silently and very cool
- Wireless controller is light and feels great
- Great-looking Blu-ray movie playback
- Price is low for a Blu-ray player
- A lot of multimedia options
- Solid backwards compatibility



The Bad:

- Terrible online store
- Slow, unintuitive browser
- No background downloading
- Games continue to play even if you eject the disc; you have to manually restart the UI via the controller
- Messy UI
- HD scaler doesn't work right
- Price is high for a video game console
- No rumble, controller loses sync with system sometimes; little game support for motion-sensing features
- Uninspired launch lineup

The Ugly:

- Knowing that no one is actually playing this thing, every system is waiting in a box somewhere for the eBay profit.