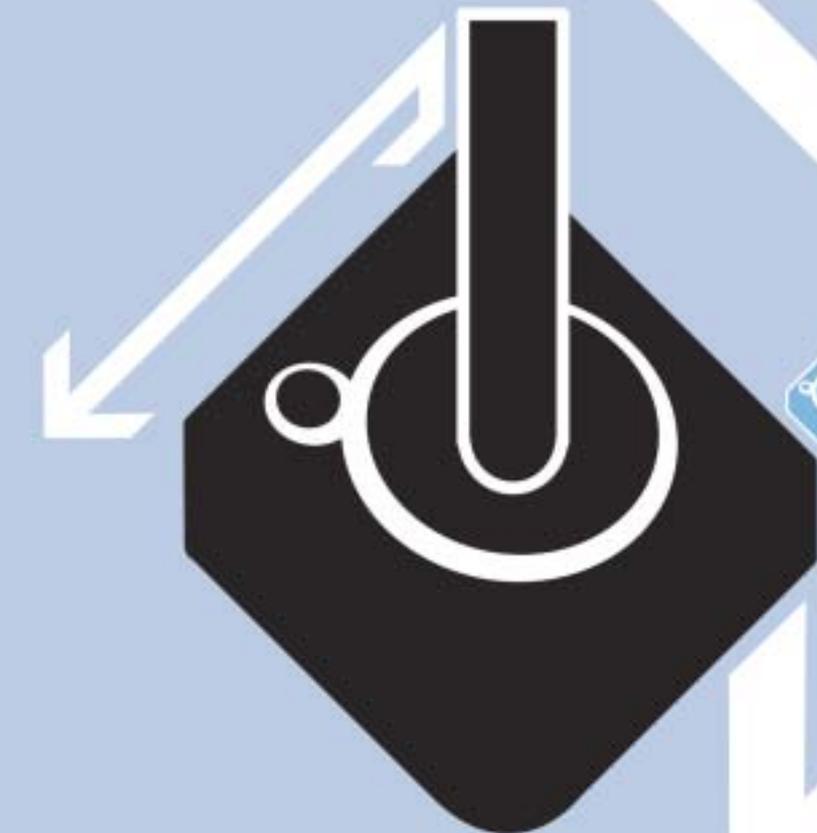


Fighting over fat pipes



Touted as the next big thing, console manufacturers and ISPs are setting out their online gaming stalls. Armed with a broadband connection, the leading consoles and a good old PC, Spencer Dalziel looks at what's on offer



Connecting to the internet over a dialup modem is fine for browsing or sending email, but narrowband connectivity simply can't channel the mass of data required for the majority of modern online games.

"Gaming over narrowband is like trying to suck pizza through a straw," explains a spokesperson for Microsoft's Xbox console. "Technically, it might be possible, but it's decidedly unsatisfactory," he said.

Many eagle-eyed firms hosting servers, whether they are ISPs, console manufacturers or web companies, have spotted this opportunity and are staking their reputations on gaming being the killer application for the burgeoning broadband market.

Console wars

Projected forecasts for broadband gaming suggest it will be big business. According to a study commissioned by Elspa (the European Leisure Software Publishers Association), spending on these emerging services by European consumers will generate more than €2.5bn in revenues by 2006. It also believes such activities will drive the takeup of broadband services – a predicted 16.6 million European households will connect their game consoles to the net over the next five years.

This year will see the big three manufacturers fight it out with the implementation of their online strategies for console owners. Sony's PS2

Broadband providers

Whatever console takes the fancy of the masses the only way they can get online is by hooking up with a standard broadband connection. Step forward Telewest and BT Openworld, both of whom have signed deals with Sony and Microsoft in the hope of generating revenue from online console players.

Telewest's Blueyonder broadband service has been involved in the closed testing of Sony's PS2 and the beta trials for Microsoft's Xbox Live service. At the moment Telewest hasn't finalised details of the service or pricing but 500 of its guinea-pig gamers have given a hub for easy connection to the Xbox. You have to live in a cabled area to receive the cable-based service but Telewest does offer connection speeds of up to 1Mbps (megabit per second) – twice as fast as BT's ADSL and 20 times faster than a dialup modem. NTL has a similar cable service for Xbox Live.

BT Openworld currently has details of its PS2 network service firmly under wraps but it has released some information regarding the Xbox Live service. Later this year BT Openworld plans to launch a home hub that will connect the Xbox console to a broadband-enabled phonenumber via its ethernet port – a great solution because it means the Xbox doesn't have to be tethered to a PC. It's the first company in the UK to provide an ADSL solution for Xbox Live gamers.

You got me pinging the narrowband blues

I'm playing a PC game called Medal of Honor over the internet and another online player controlling an enemy soldier has heedlessly strolled into my line of fire. I have him in my sights. By all rights I should fell him with a carefully aimed shot but my opposition is playing with an exceedingly unfair advantage and he's not cheating.

I know he has an advantage because I can see from his statistical information that he's playing online with a low ping rate. His PC is "pinging" the server that's hosting our online game by sending out packets to garner information about the server. Measured in milliseconds, the rate of the ping he receives back helps determine the latency (speed) of the server and the lower his ping rate, the better his connection to that server. The low rate he's getting signifies he's playing online via a broadband connection – ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) or cable – and this means he's playing without any lag.

So what do the mechanics of this technological explanation actually translate into? Well, his broadband connection allows him to see what's happening in the game just a few milliseconds after it actually happens. I, on the other hand, am playing over the internet using a 56Kbps narrowband modem so my connection is, in theory at least, 10 times slower than his. As a result, my ping rate is high and I'm suffering the annoyance of lag and latency – the game information I see displayed on my monitor is jerky and already a few seconds out of date. In other words, by the time I get to see my foe cross my firing line he's actually standing behind me preparing to give me a good fragging (killing).

In the frenetic pace of online war, I'm in a lose-lose situation.

(PlayStation2) may be the most successful console in terms of units sold but the advent of broadband gaming brings a whole new dimension to the question of which console is the best.

While Nintendo, Sony and Microsoft are at wildly different phases of development for their services, it's absolutely certain that the broadband market will play a key role in their plans.

Nintendo

Though Nintendo started life manufacturing playing cards in 1951, its brand name is now synonymous with computer games thanks to the ubiquity of its coin-operated 70s arcade games. Despite boasting some proud achievements in gaming – such as making the number one toy in America, the Nintendo Entertainment System – Nintendo has been resolutely slow with its plans for online play on its GameCube console.

The giant, however, is fighting back. Nintendo recently began selling a modem and broadband adapter for the GameCube. This is to tally with the launch of Phantasy Star Online – Nintendo's first online game. Previously only available on PCs, this is the first ever MMORPG (massively multiplayer online role-playing game) to hit a console and it can be played over the internet on the GameCube.

Nintendo doesn't have plans to develop its own titles and harbours no interest in establishing its own infrastructure for online playing services. You might get the benefits of broadband gaming from Nintendo but you're not going to get the level of content and support offered by Sony's PS2 and Microsoft's Xbox.

Sony

Like Nintendo, Sony plans to make narrowband and broadband connectivity options available for its PS2. But here the similarities end because Sony has every intention of creating the best online services for its top-selling console.



Sony is backing up its words with a host of partnerships from content companies, games publishers and ISPs in the hope that the online experience it offers is unsurpassed.

The broadband network gaming pack launches in the UK this Spring and will go on sale for £44.99. Included in the pack will be a PS2 ethernet network adapter, a startup disc featuring demos of the games already developed for online play and a voice communicator so gamers can speak to each other while they're playing. The formula adopted by Sony has already proved to be such a success in North America and Japan that it has become the number one online console service. Sony's and Microsoft's online services are very similar and over the coming months we'll see if the European online market fulfils predictions by taking up broadband console gaming.

Though the future is murky, one thing is definite. From Sony's perspective it was sensible to include a narrowband adapter for players using dialup modems. By casting a wider net Sony will catch players not yet hooked up with the benefits of a high-speed connection but it's likely these players won't receive the same quality of service delivered to broadband users due to their slow 56Kbps service.

Microsoft

Sony's domination of the games market is being challenged by software giant Microsoft. Not only has Microsoft developed a video games console called the Xbox but it also intends to invest £1.27bn in creating a broadband-only online infrastructure, known as Xbox Live, for its console players.

Microsoft is adamant that broadband is the future of console gaming and so Xbox Live is not designed to work over a narrowband connection.

The Xbox Live service was launched on 14 March 03 but beta testing by thousands of gamers has been underway since November. In theory, Microsoft should have ironed out any problems before the launch date so end users get a polished service. The Xbox Live starter



kit costs £39.99 and this incorporates a one-year subscription. Included in the pack will be an Xbox ethernet network adapter, a startup disc featuring demos of the games already developed for online play and a voice communicator so gamers can speak to each other while they're playing. Sound familiar?

One big advantage for the Xbox is its internal 8GB hard drive. This will allow users to download additional paid services through Xbox Live, such as new characters and games that are delivered in episodes.

Sony has no equivalent and the hard drive demonstrates Microsoft's commitment to transferring huge swathes of gaming data via Xbox Live – something that would be technically difficult for narrowband users.

Microsoft's Xbox division may have announced losses of £122m but its overall aim was always to create a healthy long-term revenue stream from online services for the Xbox. While it won't be replenishing stocks for a few years to come, the company firmly believes that the killer application for broadband is pay-per-play online gaming services.

Wither the humble PC

As the PC ceases to be the only web-enabled device for high-end gaming, will its function as a games box die away?



Console manufacturers, ISPs and broadband providers may be touting slick packages to entice the online gamer but the PC does have a few nifty tricks up its sleeve that will ensure its shelflife as an online games system.

The PC offers online players functionality beyond the remit of console gaming and PC users can track down free services for online play – an impossibility for the pay-per-play subscription-based model open to online console players.

Geraint Bungay, head of Games Strategy at BT Openworld says he is confident that within 12 months no professionally run online games service for the PC will be free of charge. Given that BT Openworld already owns a PC payment-only service called Games Domain, this comes as no surprise.

However the key word here is 'professionally'. Free online play is available to PC users via any of the hundreds of thousands of amateur servers. IT-literate PC gamers know how to set up and run amateur servers and any PC user playing online can access them using the in-game browsers.

Demographically speaking a PC owner is an entirely different entity to a teenage console player and, in general, more likely to be well versed in technology. This signifies an important difference because PC games have long contained open code that players can modify to create more skins (character faces/clothes) and levels for other online gamers to download – something that can't be done on a console.

Players who modify the source code are known as modders, and games developers have embraced their work because it increases the shelflife of released titles. The biggest online PC game is called Counter-Strike – created as a modification of Sierra's Half-Life by an amateur modder.

Broadband is best

Though it looks like PC users have the edge over console gamers, the real winner is broadband. It doesn't matter what system prevails on the market and it doesn't matter that PC users can play online for free.

What really matters is that a high-quality service and decent online gaming isn't possible without a broadband connection – be it ADSL or cable. For that privilege, this year will see a vast number of console and PC players signing up to pay for the best online connection to the internet. ■

Setting up Xbox Live



We tested the Xbox Live service with a Microsoft starter kit and an ADSL broadband connection. With the right equipment getting online with an Xbox is simple. Be warned, though, we didn't get the plug-and-play simplicity we'd expected so you'll need to be fairly PC literate.

There are three types of connection to choose from when hooking up an Xbox for online play. You can opt for the more complicated router setup or go with the easier direct connection. For this your cable or ADSL modem has an extra ethernet port that you can plug directly into the Xbox. This is great for attaching the console to your television. We had to connect via Windows ICS (internet connection sharing), however, because our external USB broadband modem didn't have ethernet support.

ICS requires that your PC has a network card and you'll need a crossover ethernet cable so the Xbox can share the internet connection with the PC. Unless you have an extremely long cable, the disadvantages are obvious. You need to have your computer turned on to operate the console and the Xbox sits close to the PC so you also have to place a television next to it. A strange setup that means you probably won't be able to play from the comfort of your sofa.

If all is well, the dashboard on the Xbox will automatically detect your connections but you may need to manually enter information such as host name, MAC (media access control) address, IP address and DNS (domain name server) settings. If you thought online console gaming would be easier than playing on a PC then think again.