Xbox Series X unleashed: Our unrestricted preview

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- Glamour shots with Xbox Series X and its accompanying gamepad.
  Sam Machkovech
- Notice that the top array of venting dots looks different depending on the angle? That’s intentional on Microsoft’s part.
  Sam Machkovech
- Should you choose to place your new Xbox Series X console on a set of stairs, Ars Technica cannot be held liable for any tripping or stumbling on your part.
  Sam Machkovech

If you’d like to estimate Microsoft’s confidence in its upcoming Xbox Series X console, start with the fact that the company gave us a console three weeks ago… and didn’t hang around to see what we’d do with it.

That’s not how cutting-edge hardware previews tend to work. There are supposed to be multiday events! And corporate handlers! And finger sandwiches! But mostly, there’s supposed to be control on the manufacturer’s part, in terms of swapping in new hardware or addressing failures the moment something might go wrong for a prospective critic. At such events, staffers may as well wear shirts that read, “We’re still

working the kinks out on that."

Obviously, the massive, in-person events didn't happen this year. So what do you do as the industry's game-console underdog in order to convince people that your $500 console is better than the other $500 console? One of Microsoft's answers, apparently, was to drive a truck full of "PROTOTYPE"-labeled Xbox Series X consoles to critics' homes *far* earlier than we expected.

Today, after a few preliminary articles, I've finally been given the go-ahead to preview anything about the console that I want. (Not "review," "preview.")

From what I've tested so far, the company has good reason to be confident about this quiet, efficient hardware. Unless I'm missing something huge—even Red Rings needed longer than 22 days to manifest—my hardware experience has so far been quite smooth. As a computing device, Xbox Series X may go down in history as one of the most remarkable machines ever made—as compared to other products in its era, power level, and price.

But a piece of hardware is only as good as the software that it runs. While Microsoft has good reason to be confident about Xbox Series X as a big, honkin' box in your living room, the same can't be said for the range of software we've seen thus far. There's a lot to talk about with this console, so strap in as we jump from topic to topic and break down what a $499 gaming console can offer in 2020.

Hardware and orientation

- The "non-final" Xbox Series X, photographed before we powered it on.
  Sam Machkovech
- The "non-final" Xbox Series X, photographed before we powered it on.

Sam Machkovech

- Xbox Series X, in vertical orientation.
  Sam Machkovech
- The bottom stand is non-removable. Part of that may have to do with certain system parts being exposed by the open grating of this side of the system (which may or may not appear in the "final" retail version of the console).
  Sam Machkovech
- Perspective, as compared to a Nintendo Switch—which, let's be clear, operates at a *very* different power threshold than a 4K-ready, 12 TFLOP console.
  Sam Machkovech
- Perspective, as compared to a Nintendo Switch.
  Sam Machkovech
- Back-of-X ports. The front includes one additional USB Type-A 3.1 port.
  Sam Machkovech

Let's start with the system's physical design, which I've now lived with for 22 days—in both horizontal and vertical orientations. You'll likely experiment with both when you unbox Series X, whose cuboid structure (11.6 inches tall, 6 inches long, 6 inches wide) is a rarity in consumer electronics. Think of the common phrase "slot into your entertainment center," and you can imagine receivers, DVD players, and other electronics that share a certain shape: not too tall, but plenty long and/or wide. You probably have shelves perfectly set up for these things to slide into.

The only "recent" exception I can think of isn't a good one: the GameCube, one of Nintendo's lowest-selling consoles.

To get my preferred entertainment center to accept the Series X, I had to adjust its shelves so that the system's vertical orientation, topping out at six inches, would have enough clearance room. (The gargantuan PlayStation 5's horizontal orientation reportedly tops out a hair above four inches, but

its other dimensions, 15.4 x 10.2 inches, will still crowd out your other devices.) The Series X fit down there. It was fine. Then I looked at it and got a bit sad.

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