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Reconceptualizing the Xbox Platform

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Reconceptualizing the Xbox Platform

by Jonathan Hayes

In the business of game consoles, Microsoft has yet to be more than a distant second to Sony. This situation may be

changing, however. Jonathan Hayes chronicles how an international team of insiders and consultants has created a Microsoft video gaming strategy and design that, with its versatility and personalization options, promises to capture the imagination of users around the globe.



I told my guys that this was one of those programs, the perfect storm, where everything lines up for a once in a lifetime experience; something they'll never forget and always be associated with. That if they kept that in mind, the magic would come and great work would happen. I told them that they had trained for this chance and, no matter what, we needed to make it the best we could; even when things happen we have no control over.

—Brett Lovelady, Astro Studios
(Xbox 360 industrial design partner)



Jonathan Hayes,
Design Director, Xbox
Platform, Microsoft
Corporation

Microsoft faced a major challenge in the booming \$10 billion video-gaming market. Its Xbox console was a distant second to market leader Sony Playstation. Therefore, the launch of the new Xbox 360 (code-named Xenon during its top-secret development) was a make-or-break situation for Microsoft in that business. Not only did the console need to have superior technical capabilities, but it also needed to reach out to an audience beyond serious gamers to pay off on the company's significant investment. There needed to be quantum leaps in both design and marketing, not just incremental improvement. To accomplish this far-reaching vision, we needed to

develop a design culture that was separate (physically and mentally) from the Microsoft mainstream. We also needed to draw support from management—all the way up through chairman Bill Gates—and to assemble a cross-functional team of consultants who were able to collaborate creatively.

Although the technical improvements to the product are enormous, I will focus on the equally interesting and challenging process of industrial design and related brand development that will be the “face” of the product when it is launched later this year.

During this enormously complex process, we sought to create a product and a brand that would appeal both rationally and emotionally to a global audience beyond serious gamers. Our goal was to conjure up an experience that has cultural relevance within the twenty-first century zeitgeist of limitless on-demand entertainment and real-time global connectivity.

Groundwork

Microsoft’s first design challenge was restructuring the organization to create a culture with real creative vitality. Sony Corporation, Xbox’s primary competitor, has one of the world’s strongest design traditions. And while design flourishes in some parts of Microsoft, the Xbox

organization had struggled to build a group that could really establish design leadership. The existing talent was scattered across the organization, and most of the designers only had time to react to incoming requests for incremental changes.

The right “org” for the job?

In October 2003, we started organizing for the effort by combining several functions into a hardware/software user

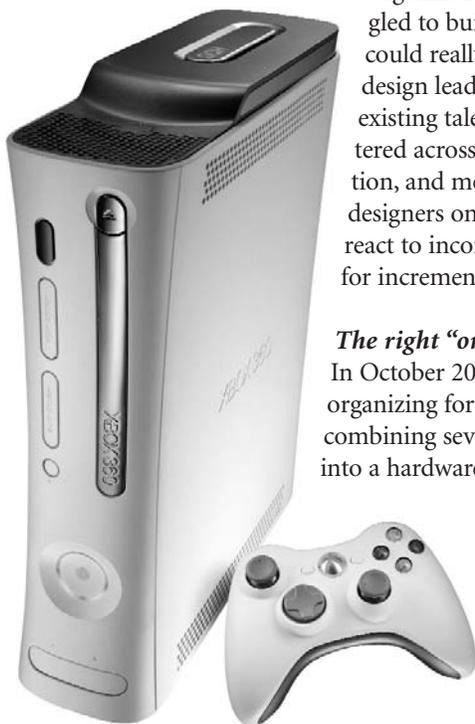


Figure 1. Xbox 360 console and wireless controller.

experience group, under Don Coyner. Coyner, who ran the ‘Xbox1’ brand/marketing team, had been pushing for a change that would elevate the role of design, giving it a deeper role in creating an international product.

Don Coyner (user experience director):

Industrial design, as a discipline, reported through the peripherals group lead. I thought it was crazy that ID was sitting in peripherals. My feeling was: If we truly want to ship a world-class design, we have to elevate the importance of design in the Xbox organization. Why isn’t this a cabinet-level position?

J Allard (platform vice president):

Don is not a designer, but he empowers people. It was not the answer you’d get by looking at resumes, but that’s not how we do things here. He was the right choice; he built a giant bridge back to brand.

As with any organizational shift, not everyone was happy with his or her new reality. Both within the new new team and among key “clients,” there were pockets of discontent. We theorized that combining the functions would result in better service to the external groups because information sharing would improve integration between hardware and software. However, this meant that members of the hardware team no longer had a user researcher and designer within their chain of command. Despite these issues, Xbox management stood behind the change.

Todd Holmdahl (vice president of hardware):

On the front end, I’ve always felt it’s

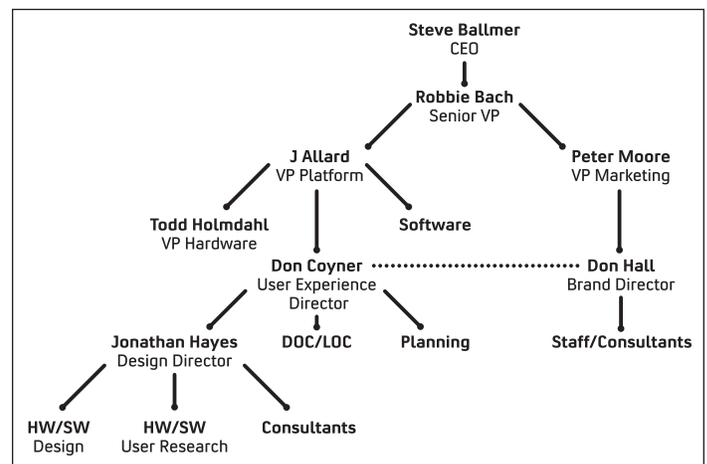


Figure 2. Xbox organization: platform and marketing.

important to have the whole team together. Product team camaraderie is more important in the beginning. But as you go down the line, functional efficiencies have more impact. That said, I think for design and usability people, it's even more important that they have each other. They need to riff on each other's ideas and poke holes in them to make them stronger. Designers are usually very good at taking input and incorporating it.

Get a Room

Because the re-org happened with the Xbox 360 console, controller, and user-interface initiatives in progress, the new user experience team needed to learn how to work together very quickly. Key to the group's success in this was the decision to create a dedicated work space. In January, we set to work configuring the windowless 12-foot-by-25-foot rectangle that was to become the design lab. The shelves filled with prototypes, the white-board with user interface flow diagrams, and the tack surface with industrial design drawings. Now the members of the group could get to know each other by solving problems together—without ever worrying about packing up.

Frameworks: Orientation in the Solution Space and Process

Framing the Solution Space

To involve our executive team in the design process, we arrayed our seven initial console designs on a grid, with architectural/organic on the horizontal axis and mild/wild on the vertical. The current Xbox design was placed into the

architectural/wild space as a reference. Using this tool ensures that the conversation is about design *language* and not about design *preference*. Ironically, within a charged atmosphere like Microsoft, the key is being *dispassionate* when you talk about design. And because the creative process is inherently nonlinear, we needed to provide the execs with a map—a way of thinking about and comparing these seven designs (see figure 3).

Don Coyner: It was super-important to frame the discussion so that the execs understood what they were looking at, the type and depth of feedback we needed, and perhaps most important, the kind of feedback we *didn't* need to move the project ahead.

Russ Glaser (user interface design manager): It let people think about where you should go—gave us a common language, and that was really important. Even though it was a “squishy” framework, it established where the ID was going and gave UI a target to hit.

Framing the Process

Our convergence diagram was based on the goal of creating a consistent experience from pixels to plastics. To represent this intention, we gave executives a temporal map illustrating how consistency was to be achieved. We handled consistency as you would any other design problem. We created a sketch of what we thought it should look like, and then followed the drawing to create the reality. The initial chart just showed the console, the controller, and the UI converging—in other words, it represented the user

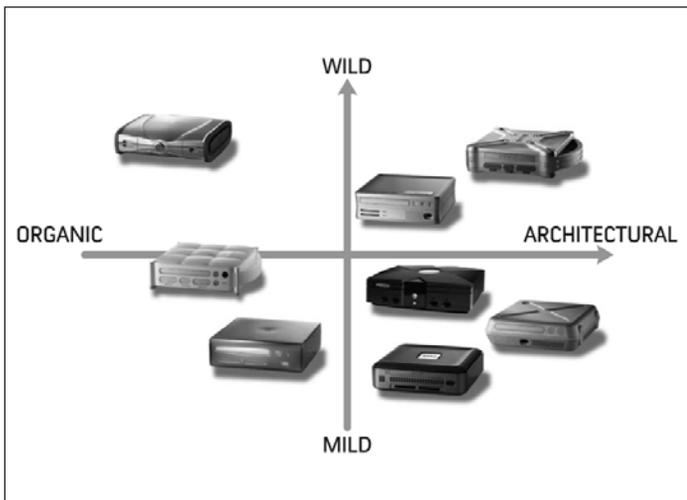


Figure 3. Framing the solution space.

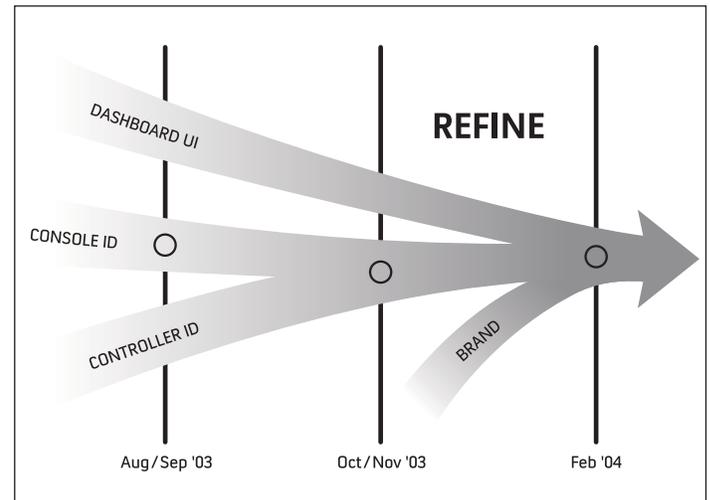


Figure 4. Framing the process: Creating a cohesive experience.

experience worldview. But as the brand team ramped up, they were quickly added to the chart. All the tributaries, one by one, joined the flow: console, UI, controller, brand, packaging, trade shows, retail, and advertising.

Balancing Regions, Segments, and Forces

One World

Because our goal was to drive toward a global design, early in 2003 Don Coyner initiated a world tour of design firms. Don and Jim Stewart, who managed design planning, traveled throughout Europe, visiting firms in Sweden, England, France, and Italy. Then they visited two firms in Japan before they returned home.

Upon returning to Redmond, they selected five teams to work with: Marc Newson in Paris; Propeller in Sweden; Pioneer Design in Tokyo, Hers Experimental Design Laboratory in Osaka; and Herbst Lazaar Bell in Chicago. Alan Han, from Microsoft's Hardware Design Group, also generated a console concept that was well-received. These firms were given preliminary engineering specs and a detailed design brief and asked to design a console that would be compelling to their region—while still appealing to other parts of the world. After receiving multiple concept sketches from each partner, we chose seven very different ideas to model. Each direction, or “gesture,” was built with materials and colors appropriate to the concept. For example, the team in Sweden focused on the idea of ice, and their console was a glowing, glossy block illuminated by a light source at the center. Hers had two interesting ideas: a very mechanistic metal box with a prominent X, and a much more subtle glossy white treatment with a billowing top that we called *pillow*.

R and D: Research and Diplomacy

Once the initial models had been shown to the executive team, we headed back around the world by way of Japan. Although our first-generation product is very successful in the US and fairly successful in Europe, sales in Japan have

been abysmal. Of the 25 million to 30 million ‘Xbox1’ consoles we’ll sell, less than a million will have sold in Japan. And while Japan is not a critical region in terms of its impact on our overall Xbox 360 unit-volume goals, its strategic importance can’t be overstated. Japan is where the gaming business first took off. It is the home to many top developers whom we need as partners in order to compete with the Sony game library. And discerning Japanese consumers hold foreign products to a higher standard than domestic competitors. Mike Fischer, who ran the marketing group for our sizable Xbox team in Japan, provides a useful analogy: “Think of someone from California considering a Japanese surfboard.” Everyone believed a product that was successful in Japan would naturally be more appealing to the rest of the world.

Peter Moore (marketing vice president): You know the scene in [the film] *Lost in*

Translation where that hip Tokyo guy is trying to direct Bill Murray in the Scotch commercial? If we can create a design that knocks *his* socks off, we should be able to sell it to *anyone*.

Over the course of 16 months, we traveled around the world a number of times, stopping in Japan to discuss new designs with our colleagues and to review them with Japanese gamers.

Over the course of 16 months, we traveled around the world a number of times, stopping in Japan to discuss new designs with our colleagues and to review them with Japanese gamers. This series of visits brought us much closer to the Xbox team in Tokyo—which was a powerful connection to have

when disagreements about the design inevitably came up. Tomoko Matsubara, who managed the research in Japan, and Mike Fischer, described our visits:

Tomoko Matsubara (consumer insight manager, Japan): Before doing the research in Japan, you always had the team review the models... to get opinions before research. Because you showed certain measures, it was not just about preference.

Mike Fischer (marketing director, Japan): I think the single strongest impression was the

approach you took to genuinely listening to all input, no matter how ridiculous it might be. This is a departure from the typical Microsoft “debating society” approach. Even your body language and eye contact conveyed sincere openness. This is why the team liked to have you visit.

In Europe, which had strong sales and was less suspicious of offshore products, we used a very similar approach. In both cases, we came to appreciate the value of “face time” in today’s email-driven world, and the chance to get real-time feedback from a variety of team members.

Balancing Segments

One of our goals was to expand the audience for Xbox beyond core gamers. With our increased focus on what we call the digital entertainment lifestyle, there was a very real chance that gamers within the hardcore segments might regard the product as directed toward the mass market, and therefore not “serious” enough for their needs. This balance was reflected in our evolution of the design and the brand.

Don Hall (brand director): There was a balance between carrying forward the equity of the first Xbox and leaving some of its baggage behind. ID and brand played complementary roles in that balancing act: ID needed to make a bold new start, and brand needed to be more evolutionary. When customers think about Xbox and see the new version, there has to be enough connective tissue.

Balancing Forces

Core to this challenge was finding the right bal-

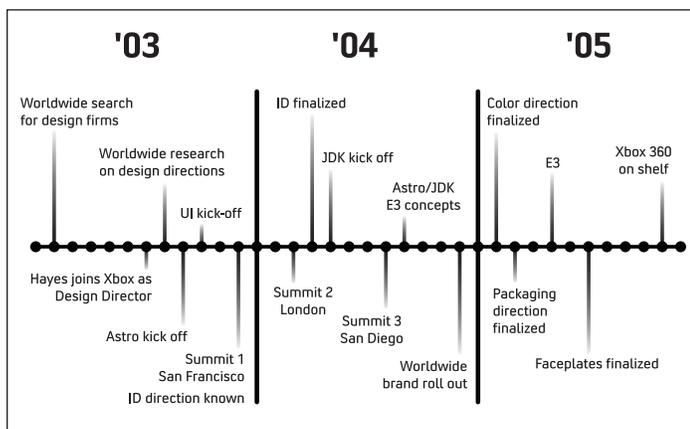


Figure 5. Xbox 360 project timeline.

ance of forces within the Xbox organization. Looking back on ‘Xbox1’, most people in the organization don’t see it as a design failure—the team just wasn’t ready to *consider* design. Xbox literally handled function and form in sequence. ‘Xbox1’ was about proving that Microsoft could build a viable gaming platform; Xbox 360 is about doing it *right*. J Allard and his team knew they needed to be more balanced the second time out, in order to broaden the product’s appeal.

J Allard: We knew we had to overcompensate because design is not generally supported at Microsoft; it’s an engineering culture. The tension dynamic needed to be balanced. We believed that the console was the anchor point—if we got *that* right, everything would radiate from there. That’s why this effort started with hardware. Then we created the user experience group to get the right balance between hardware and software.

The result of this effort is a system that’s much more approachable. One common reaction from the press: “Finally, a console that I don’t have to hide in the basement.”

Communication: Managing the Flow of Information and Ideas

The Xbox 360 design team found new ways of strengthening the standard channels of internal communication while also opening the door for a number of consultant/consultant collaborations—often with the Xbox team merely “listening in.” This work spanned user experience to the brand team. Don Coyner and Don Hall — the Dons, as they became known — had very different styles, yet worked well together. J Allard and the executive team realized the importance of that connection: “This is not a product and it’s not a marketing task. It’s about cohesion. Brand and design are inextricable in this. We got to the core in the first round, how do we get to the masses?”

Between user experience and the brand team, we worked with a dozen external consultants over the course of the project—and at least five were major partners. As they got up to speed creatively, we had to ensure that these very different groups were all running in the same basic direction. To accomplish this, we supplemented the constant communication and internal meet-

ings with a series of design summits, held at various non-Microsoft locations. The participants varied, but the goal of each session was creative synergy and the integration of our respective sets of ideas.

Don Coyner: Getting a variety of creative minds together to brainstorm on a problem is always risky. There's some chance you're going to get something, some chance you won't. These meetings also shed light on whether you have the right partners: people who like to roll-up their sleeves and collaborate—who are secure enough to be comfortable in that atmosphere.

For the first summit, held in San Francisco, in December 2003, the goal was to ensure a deep connection among the product's industrial design, its preliminary brand work, and its nascent user interface. The meeting involved 30 people and two full days of collaborative work. The partners who joined the Xbox design and brand teams at the first summit were Astro Studios (industrial design, San Francisco), AKQA (user interface design, London), and Landor Associates (brand strategy, San Francisco).

Don Hall: In San Francisco, the gears were just starting to hit each other, and we saw some sparks. Important conceptual groundwork and cross-functional dialogue really started to happen there. Some of it was painful, but we saw real progress. In San Francisco, brand was just getting going. UI had started in October, and they were impatient for a target to hit.

At the next summit, hosted by AKQA in their London headquarters, we discussed progress on the user interface, reviewed the latest industrial design model, and looked at ways to further leverage the now established brand direction. But it was in the last summit, held August 2004, in San Diego, that we really got a sense of how things were coming together—and this motivated us to push convergence even further. The industrial design had solidified except for color, and the user interface was down to a pair of alternatives (which were to run through focus testing in San Diego and Tokyo directly following the summit). In addition to the brand and

user experience teams from Xbox, we hosted Jager Di Paola Kemp (a new brand partner from Burlington, Vermont), AKQA, and O2 Studios, our LA-based color and materials specialists.

Michael Jager (creative director, Jager DiPaolo Kemp): The San Diego summit was a pivotal moment. It was a collaborative session full-on—a test of colliding creatives, managers, nationalities. Reflecting on it, it was a big-ass experiment for everyone, but it brought a lot of people with solid points of view and knowledge together and I applaud the Xbox crew's willingness to risk this kind of play.... It was fun, raw, real, honest, and scary, and it drove the project and the cause.

This third meeting was called the tone summit, because our focus was on honing details—the spaces in between. The product's word mark and industrial design were complete, and the user experience team had a strong favorite for the user interface. Because of our concerted efforts in the first two summits, these three primary “stones”—ID, UI, and brand—already fit snugly together. Now we needed to find the right mortar to lock them in place: the right system font, color palette, boot-up animation, and sonic branding.

Throughout the Xbox 360 development, we triangulated the ideation process, with consultants expected to work not only with us but with each other. This posed some challenges as they sometimes weren't clear whether they were working on another firm's turf. In the end, however, the synergy of these collaborations paid off in new ideas and new twists on existing concepts.



Figure 6. San Diego Tone Summit collaboration.

Astro/Hers: Console Industrial Design

While Astro Studios was our lead industrial design partner, Hers Experimental Design Laboratories had put forth two very compelling gestures, and Chiaki Murata, the chief creative, had won the respect of our team. We decided to have Hers rejoin the project, but its exploration would focus on the double-concave gesture that Astro had developed. To ease engineering's concerns about supporting two designs, we agreed that the twin ID development efforts would both work around the same configuration. In other words, any requests to change the mechanical configuration needed to be brought to engineering on behalf of both the Astro and the Hers teams. While challenging from a political and efficiency standpoint, the process resulted in a true blending of the designs and a stronger product as a result. In the end, the teams developed a high regard for each other.



Figure 7. Brett Lovelady (Astro) and Chiaki Murata (Hers) at E3.

JDK/Hers: Faceplates

A major strategic pillar for Xbox 360 is the idea of customization, and for XPX the creative process started with faceplates. Like a cell-phone, the console's part construction allows the user to swap the front bezel; but unlike cell-phone plates, its UI theme provides a consistent look and feel in the software. Using their experience with Burton Snowboards and others, JDK created about 100 faceplate concepts for the US and Europe, which we narrowed down through a combination of internal discussions and research. In Japan, the team hired Hers to design a series of faceplates that would appeal to the nuances of that market. Then the team from Japan met at JDK's studio to translate initial concepts into feasible designs for IMD (in-mold decoration)—an East-meets-West design collaboration that lit up both teams.

Astro/JDK: E3 Booth Exploration

Coming off the success of the console collaboration, we decided that two groups that were given clear direction and that were secure in their talents would generally produce great results. As a result, we asked JDK and Astro to jointly consider the booth for our largest trade show, the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3). They were asked to develop a creative presentation for six architectural firms that were candidates for the final booth design. The Xbox team was completely uninvolved during the three weeks it took to prepare the presentation.



Figure 8. Jager, Murata, and Hayes at JDK faceplate workshop.



Figure 9. 2005 Xbox E3 booth, designed by PPBD.

Ron Caruso, from PPBD, the firm that ultimately won the business, describes its reaction on seeing the presentation:

Ron Caruso (PPBD): Through the presentation our smiles were growing, and at the end we looked at each other and said, “We can win this one.” You guys are so self-deprecating, but this was absolutely, positively the best immersion meeting we’ve ever been part of. We related to your passion and wanted to make sure this brand was dimensionalized properly.

The results of this collaboration created exactly the buzz we were hoping to get at E3. As the *Seattle Times* noted following the show:

You have to hand it to Microsoft: It has marketing down to a science. At its press event, a theater in the round reinforced its 360 concept. Microsoft’s E3 booth looked like a London nightclub. The room’s design matched the mod style of the Xbox 360, while nearby staff wore clothing with just a hint of the lime green from the console’s power button.¹

Seven Design Management Lessons from the Xbox 360 Development

Lesson 1: Develop creative critical mass.

Gather designers, artists, and user researchers into the same team. No organizational benefit of dispersing them will outweigh the benefit of having them together. Even if it’s a closet, get them a room—it will accelerate their sense of being a team and, with it, their creativity. Better, more integrated solutions will result.

Lesson 2: Provide a map.

If your design goals are ambitious, you’ll need to provide tools to orient your management in the problem space and in the process. Be dispassionate and focus on de-mystifying design by relating it to things your stakeholders can understand.

Lesson 3: Combine research and diplomacy.

Go deep with your regional subsidiaries by leveraging research you’re doing in their region or by pushing for their involvement in your meetings. This will pull them into the process and further build development momentum. Paying lip service to the regional offices is worse than doing nothing at all.

Lesson 4: Share the cause.

It’s important for the hard-driving consultants to know that their client is working as hard as they are—that there’s a shared cause. Anything else you can do to foster the sense of being all one team, of really being part of the experience and not just a hired gun, helps. Draw partners into the fold.

Lesson 5: Hold summits early.

Ironically, while the initial collaborative meetings can feel less productive, they’re often where you get the most work done. It’s hard digging a foundation and relatively easy framing the building. Don’t let the early blisters discourage you.

Lesson 6: Leave your partners alone.

Once you’ve established a set of great partners, don’t be afraid to let them collaborate without your involvement. It feels risky, but can be a great opportunity for creative synergy. This type of collaboration can also further strengthen the individual partner’s bond with its client. It’s counter-intuitive, but time apart will energize the partnership.

Lesson 7: Blur the lines.

Step (respectfully) into other people’s areas and welcome others into yours. The blurring of lines between functional responsibilities and ownership, if managed properly, can be extremely valuable.

Acknowledgment

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1. Jennifer Buckendorff, “For Big 3 at E3 Expo, hardware is the name of the game.” *Seattle Times*, Monday, May 23, 2005.