



Microsoft Plays a New Zune

Microsoft has never been shy about adapting a good idea when it sees one, so naturally its new Zune music player and download service take a page from Apple's iPod/iTunes business. Zune's large display and wireless capability may well appeal to some users. But they won't be enough to overcome the huge head start Apple enjoys in the market.

Zune represents an abrupt reversal of Microsoft's earlier music strategy, which was supplying software to music vendors and independent hardware makers. These iPod wannabes have improved of late, but they still haven't caught up to Apple, and the various music offerings fall far short of the seamless experience on the iTunes Store. With Zune, Microsoft adopts Apple's model of end-to-end control of hardware, software, and content retailing.

Microsoft hopes Zune's ability to share music will be the killer distinction, as implied in its marketing slogan "Welcome to the Social." The players use Wi-Fi wireless to detect any other Zunes within about a 30-foot radius and send them songs. A shared song can be played just three times in a three-day period unless the owner cables the Zune to a PC and buys the tune from the Zune store. Unlike the player from startup MusicGremlin, which also offers Wi-Fi sharing, the only wireless downloads the Zune can receive are songs sent from other Zunes.

THE \$249 ZUNE PLAYER IS AN ATTRACTIVE design, available in black, brown, or white. It has 30 gigabytes of storage and is about 1/4-in. longer and thicker than the similarly priced 30 GB iPod. But it makes good use of the extra bulk with its substantially bigger 3-in. display. It also has an FM radio. And while the controls lack the elegant minimalism of iPod's scroll wheel they are well designed and efficient. I had some difficulty installing the software—which requires Windows XP Service Pack 2—and getting the player to sync. But I was testing a preproduction version of the program; the problems should be fixed by the Nov. 14 launch.

The Zune player can handle the standard, unprotected audio and video files common to portable players. But when it comes to copy-protected content, it will only take files purchased from Zune Marketplace. Songs and videos protected by earlier versions of Microsoft's own digital rights management software, including PlaysForSure, will not work.

On the screen, the black, gray, and orange hues of the Zune library software have a more modern look than the rather plain-



vanilla iTunes, even though the basic layout is similar. It is a vast improvement over the familiar Windows Media Player.

The Marketplace music store is more problematic. For the sake of consistency with Xbox Live, prices are given in Microsoft points, equal to about 1.25c, a system that strikes me as silly. Songs are priced at 79 points, which works out to the 99c they cost anywhere else. Zune users have the option of a \$15 monthly subscription, which allows unlimited downloads, but the music disappears if the subscription lapses.

The ease of browsing at the store is hindered by the fact that all music is sorted into just eight popular genres and a catchall "more" category, instead of the extensive system of genres and subgenres used by iTunes.

Wireless sharing sets it apart from iPod. That might not be enough

The big problem with the Marketplace is what isn't there. Zune is a much better video player than the iPod, but there are no movies or TV shows for sale, and won't be until Microsoft works out agreements

with the studios and networks. Zune can play podcasts, but you can't subscribe to or download them through the Marketplace.

Maybe I am underestimating the desire of people, especially those of the MySpace generation, to share music by a more high-tech method than passing earbuds back and forth. If I'm not, Microsoft's only hope may be to top iTunes' menu of video offerings before Apple comes out with an enhanced video iPod, which could happen as soon as January. It looks like it's going to be a bumpy ride. •

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