Review: Sony's new PlayStation Vita disappoints

March 9 2012, By Troy Wolverton

With the PlayStation Vita, Sony has attempted to infuse a traditional handheld game machine with some of the smartphone and tablet features that have made gaming on those devices so popular lately.

Unfortunately, this merger of technologies is a clumsy union and often makes for an unsatisfying and even frustrating experience.

The Vita, which Sony released last month, looks a lot like its 7-year-old predecessor, the PlayStation Portable. It's got a large screen flanked on either side by arrays of physical buttons to control movement and actions in games.

But the device borrows quite a few ideas and features from its smartphone rivals. The Vita's screen is touch-sensitive; you can tap on it to launch apps.

Some games take advantage of the touch screen also, allowing you to, say, tap on the screen to pass a soccer ball to a teammate or swipe across the screen to punch someone in an action game.

Additionally, the Vita has a pair of cameras that allow you to take pictures, play augmented reality games and perhaps video chat with friends someday. It's got motion sensors that allow users to play games by tilting the screen. And Sony is offering a version of the Vita that will connect to the wireless carriers' 3G networks to surf the Web and download applications. That's right - apps that do things like connect to Facebook and Twitter or to find nearby Vita players.

While users can still buy games that are stored on physical cards, they can also download all the games designed for the Vita over the Internet, just like a smartphone user can from an app store. Downloading the games allows users to store multiple games on a single memory card so they can be loaded and played without switching game cards.

Sony tries to go a step beyond most smartphones and tablets by having not only physical buttons but also a touch-sensitive area on the back of the device that allows users to aim a gun, say, or nudge a ball forward without having to touch the screen and obscure what's on it.

You'll find some 25 different games designed for the Vita and an

additional 275 PSP games that you can download from Sony. If you're used to choosing from thousands of iPhone or Android games, that may not seem like a lot. But by the standards of traditional game consoles, it's a significant number for the launch of a new device.

I'm not convinced there's a killer app yet that will drive sales of the Vita, but among the launch titles are versions or new installments of games made popular on other machines, such as "Uncharted: Golden Abyss," and "FIFA Soccer." At a typical price of $30 to $50 a pop, the games are much costlier than those available for smartphones, but they also tend to offer superior graphics and much longer game play.

I was never a big fan of the PSP. Its central idea - offering full-fledged console games on a portable device - never made sense for mainstream consumers. To them, games on a portable device are largely meant to be played in passing as time-killers. There's just no time for such consumers to get sucked deep into a console game while riding the train or waiting in line at the grocery store.

But in some ways, I'm even less impressed with the Vita. It shares the same misguided premise as the PSP in offering full-scale games on a portable device. Worse, its smartphone-like features feel half-hearted and often detract from the core gaming experience.

For example, the Vita offers fewer than 20 apps. While that number includes a Web browser app and the de rigueur Facebook and Netflix programs, it doesn't include a video chat program that takes advantage of the front-facing camera or Skype or Pandora or Amazon's Kindle.

The 3G service feature also has some strict limits. You can't use it to download the hefty, top-quality Vita games. You also generally won't be able to use 3G to play those games in real-time multiplayer mode.

And the touch-screen interface on the Vita is cumbersome and annoying. As a smartphone and tablet user, I'm used to a game or app launching when I tap on its icon. But on the Vita, users are forced to go through an intermediate screen after they tap on an app icon. The screen allows users to download new content, update the app or, yes, actually launch it. In other words, it takes two taps to actually start a game, which is one tap too many.

But the most damning thing about the Vita is that it's just awkward to play games on. The array of physical buttons on traditional game controllers and portable game machines can be overwhelming. But the touch screen and touch-sensitive back on the Vita only amp up its complexity. Not only is it often difficult to know when to use the touch interfaces and when to use the physical controls, there's just no easy way to hold the device if you are being asked to do both.

In "FIFA Soccer," for example, I kept misdirecting the ball by inadvertently touching the touch-sensitive back panel; I had a hard time figuring out where to put my fingers. And in "Uncharted," I kept having to switch from two hands to one as my fingers jumped from the buttons to interacting with the touch screen.

I'm sure that some games won't have these shortcomings and that developers will figure out how to better use the Vita's controls. But even if they do, my portable game device of choice will remain a smartphone. There's more games, you can do more with it-and to me, it's just a lot more fun.

SONY PLAYSTATION VITA PORTABLE GAME SYSTEM:

-Likes: Bright high-resolution screen, moderate price, dual stick

controllers, high-quality games

-Dislikes: Complex, confusing controls; clumsy interface; few applications; requires proprietary memory cards; bulky for a portable device

-Specs: 5-inch touch-screen OLED display; dual analog joystick controllers; rear touchpad; front- and rear-facing cameras

-Price: $250 for Wi-Fi only model; $300 for model with Wi-Fi and 3G

-Web: us.playstation.com

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