

OnLive's mobile app brings sophisticated games to smartphones

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Sure, "Angry Birds" is fun, but wouldn't it be cool if you could play an actual console game like "Batman: Arkham City" on your tablet?

That's the premise behind OnLive's new smartphone and tablet app. In the past, you could play games only through the company's [online game](#) service on computers and big-screen televisions. Now, thanks to the app OnLive released earlier this month, you can also play them on Android devices such as Samsung's Galaxy Tab 10.1 and the [Motorola Razr](#).

Depending on the game and how you play it, OnLive's service on [mobile devices](#) can be fun or frustrating. At its best, it turns your mobile device into a [game machine](#) that rivals any console.

There is something undeniably awesome about OnLive's technology, which gives customers access to many of the latest high-end games without needing an expensive console or gaming PC. While users have to pay to play OnLive's games, they can access its basic service for free, whether on a computer, TV or mobile device.

OnLive's service basically runs the games on banks of computers in its data centers, then streams the images to users over the Internet. Because nearly all of the complex processing and graphics rendering is done by OnLive's computers, consumers can access the service with relatively low-power devices.

The result is that you can play games on your mobile devices that are far

more sophisticated, complex and engrossing than those you'll find in the devices' app store. And because all your game data is stored in the cloud, you can continue where you left off regardless of what device you are using.

So you can start playing a game on your PC, continue it on your television and finish it on a tablet. That's something you can't do with a typical PC, console or mobile game.

OnLive has redesigned its interface so users can interact with it using the touch screens found on most tablets and smartphones. It has also added touch-screen controls to about 25 of the 200 titles it offers. To play other games on the service on a mobile device, you'll need to buy one of OnLive new \$50 wireless game controllers.

The experience of playing an OnLive game on a tablet with one of the controllers is very much like playing a console game in your living room. The controller works the same way and the tablet effectively becomes a small TV screen. But it's a TV screen that fits in a backpack, doesn't need to be plugged in and can be used almost anywhere.

For example, I propped up a tablet against my cubicle at work and used it to play "Arkham City." I had a blast and my co-workers - who don't get paid to play games - were jealous.

Playing OnLive's games using the virtual on-screen controls is not as enjoyable, but still fun. The games work much like many of the previously available smartphone games. You typically use virtual joysticks to move a character around and virtual buttons to jump or attack.

It's great to be able to play directly on the mobile device without having to buy a controller or figure out how to prop up the screen. But the

button schemes can be complicated. Games designed for touch-screen devices have generally tried to minimize the number of virtual buttons by allowing players to use gestures or by tilting or shaking the device. OnLive doesn't yet support these alternative inputs, though, so you're stuck using on-screen buttons.

"Lego Harry Potter: Years 5-7," for example, has seven virtual buttons plus two virtual joy sticks. That's just too much to easily keep track of, even on a big-screen tablet. It's even more difficult in the cramped confines of a [smartphone](#) screen.

A bigger problem with OnLive's mobile service is that its major advantage - allowing users to play engrossing console-style games - also turns out to be a weakness. These are games that were designed to suck users in and be played for hours on end. They weren't meant to be played while standing in line at the grocery store.

Games designed for smartphones and tablets typically allow users to stop them at any point and still be able to pick up where they left off. By contrast, console games usually take returning players back to the last save point they passed. It's not unusual for there to be dozens of minutes worth of game play between those save points. While playing "Lego Harry Potter," I found myself frustrated because I wanted to stop playing but knew I would lose much of my progress and have to replay a portion.

OnLive does offer a partial solution. You can turn off your screen or switch to another app without losing your place in a game. But if you wait too long before switching back to the OnLive app, it will log you out and you will be forced to go back to your last save point the next time you log back in.

OnLive's mobile app has other shortcomings. Right now, it's only for Android devices. OnLive has versions in the works for Apple's (AAPL)

iPad and Amazon's Kindle Fire, but those haven't been released yet.

Also, the service doesn't work if you're not online and doesn't work well with slow Internet connections, which can cause the service to cut out or to deliver very low-resolution images.

Finally, OnLive games typically cost a lot more than the average iPad game. These are console games, and they're priced accordingly. OnLive does rent games for short periods and frequently offers discounts. But to have full access to a recently released top-tier [game](#), you can expect to spend up to \$50.

That's a lot more than what you'll pay for "Angry Birds." But "[Angry Birds](#)" is no "Arkham City."

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