

Sony makes mobile gaming push with handheld Vita

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This Feb. 15, 2012 photo, shows Playstation PSVita, foreground, and its predecessor. In the age of “Angry Birds” and “Words With Friends” dominating people’s on-the-go playtime, Sony is making a push into the world of handheld gaming with a gadget aimed at loyal gamers and fans of the PlayStation. (AP Photo/Reed Saxon)

(AP) -- Sony is intensifying its push in handheld gaming with a gadget aimed at hardcore players looking for something with a bit more punch than "Angry Birds," "Words With Friends" and other smartphone pastimes.

The PlayStation Vita, already available in [Japan](#), debuts in the U.S. and [Europe](#) on Wednesday. A basic, Wi-Fi version will retail at \$250, while one that can access 3G [cellular networks](#) will go for \$300 plus monthly service fees from AT&T.

Sony Corp. is promoting the device with a \$50 million marketing blitz "everywhere gamers are and where the general population is," said Jack Tretton, CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment America.

Tretton acknowledges it won't be an easy sell.

People have grown accustomed to playing games on handheld devices that also make phone calls, shoot videos, connect to the Internet, play songs and send text messages. The devices do practically everything but wash your socks.

Why buy a gadget that does only one thing?

"Ultimately, if you consider yourself a gamer, you are going to find yourself migrating up the food chain to dedicated gaming consoles and the Vita," Tretton said.

Don't tell that to Christian Thomas, a 20-year-old New York University student who tried out the Vita at a temporary lounge Sony set up to promote the system. At the "social club" in Manhattan's trendy Lower East Side, players were able to try out Vita before it goes on sale.

"I don't see myself carrying it around," Thomas said, while playing "Marvel Vs. Capcom 3." "I'm content just picking up 'Bejeweled' on my iPhone."

That's even though he called the Vita beautiful and said it's easily the best handheld gadget he's played with.

The Vita launch is an important one for Sony, although it likely won't be as big as the debut of a new gaming console. Sony has not announced the next PlayStation, but Nintendo Co. is planning to come out with its Wii U late in the year.

As a device, the Vita is sleek and powerful, melding the console-like controls that gamers are used to with touch screens common in mobile devices. Its dual analog sticks are a first for a handheld device and a must-have for shooter games played from a first-person perspective. Not only does the Vita's main screen respond to touch, but it also has a touch screen in the back that offers gamers an entirely new way of controlling gameplay.

The Vita has a 5-inch screen, front- and rear-facing cameras and a quad-core processor, which is used in the fastest tablet computers. The Vita also connects to the PlayStation 3, so players for the first time can play the same game regardless of whether they are using a console or a handheld system.

"It's a very good video game platform," said Colin Sebastian, an analyst at Baird.

That said, he believes the market has "largely moved beyond this type of experience."

"I think the dedicated handheld game market is very challenging," he said. "The odds over the long term are stacked against the Vita."

Another handheld system, the Nintendo 3DS, has been a disappointment. The gadget, which lets players see 3-D images without special glasses, hasn't sold as well as expected and was one of the reasons Nintendo reported a net loss in the last nine months of 2011. Though the machine is starting to see sales pick up following a price cut, Nintendo last month lowered its forecast for 3DS sales.

Challenges aside, Sony hyped the launch of the Vita with a lavish party at Siren Studios in Hollywood last week. The likes of "Transformers" co-star Josh Duhamel and "The Hunger Games" actor Liam Hemsworth

were in attendance. The gadget was passed around for all to try at the event, while Vita-related tweets were projected on a mammoth wall.

Elsewhere in the U.S., stores were planning midnight launch events, and the most dedicated PlayStation fans were expected to line up in anticipation. Though it may not amount to iPhone proportions, the Vita could become a hit with gamers who want to play shooters and other intense, high-end games that go beyond lunging cartoon birds at annoying green pigs. It may even give rival Nintendo a serious challenge.

Fynn Marselli, an 11-year-old who tried out the Vita at Sony's lounge, said he's now mulling the Vita after saving up to buy the Nintendo 3DS. He already has an older DS and an iPod Touch for games. With its touch screen and physical controllers, he said, the [Vita](#) is "pretty cool, a little bit of both."

"It's a little strange, using both the [touch screen](#) and controls," he said. "I have been playing with it for half an hour and I'm still figuring some things out."

Because that doesn't usually happen, he said, "it's kind of fun. Finally something I don't pick up and know everything about."

As of December, Nintendo has sold more than 165 million of its handheld DS devices worldwide, including more than 15 million of the 3DS. Sony, meanwhile, has sold 75.5 million [PlayStation](#) Portable devices, the first version of which went on sale in 2005 in the U.S. and the year before in Japan. [Sony](#) plans to continue selling the Portable machine.

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