

Review: Vita sets new standard for portable games

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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) -- The PlayStation Vita won't replace your smartphone. For starters, it isn't a telephone (although it will eventually let you use Skype). And it's too big to fit in your pants pocket, unless you're wearing M.C. Hammer-style parachute pants.

But if you love gaming on the go, you'll find room for the [Vita](#) in your jacket or your carry-on bag. It's the most beautifully designed portable [game](#) console ever, built to deliver the kind of adventures you can't get in the Apple's App Store or in the Android Market.

More than any previous handheld, the Vita feels immediately comfortable to a gamer who's spent years with a PlayStation controller in his hands. For the most part, the buttons are close to where they are on Sony's DualShock - including, most importantly, analog directional controls under each of your thumbs.

Two "thumbsticks" are essential to many games, allowing you to move your character with one stick and look around the environment with the other. The single thumbstick may have been the biggest drawback to Sony's earlier model, the PlayStation Portable, preventing its games from capturing the essence of their home-console-based cousins. Now, though, the Vita's "Uncharted: Golden Abyss" genuinely feels like an on-the-go extension of the PlayStation 3's "Uncharted 3: Drake's Deception."

In between the thumbsticks is the real showstopper: a dazzling 5-inch OLED (organic light-emitting diode) screen with [vivid colors](#) and sharp contrast. "Golden Abyss" is the system's real graphics showcase, delivering jungle landscapes that are nearly as lush as those in its PS3 cousins. Ubisoft's delightfully silly cartoon adventure "Rayman Origins" looks just as colorful as it was last year on high-definition consoles, while the abstract puzzle game "Lumines: Electronic Odyssey" hypnotizes with its virtual fireworks. And as bright as the display is, the Vita's [battery life](#) isn't bad, allowing about five hours of play between charges.

The [OLED display](#) also serves as a touch screen, which gets the most use when navigating menus. Each game and app gets its own bubble -

essentially a round version of the now-familiar iPhone icons. There are 10 bubbles per page, and you can easily slide between pages vertically or horizontally.

There's a second touch pad on the back of the unit that lets you control onscreen action without blocking it with your fingers. Most of the games released so far make limited use of the fingertip controls; if you're curious about how Sony might exploit the tech, check out "Little Deviants," "ModNation Racers: Road Trip" or the endearingly macabre "Escape Plan."

The Vita also has built-in motion sensors - so, for example, you can steer a vehicle in "Wipeout 2048" by tilting the hardware. And cameras on the front and back of the machine let you superimpose game graphics on top of real-world settings. You won't want to use the cameras to take photos, though: The results are unacceptably grainy.

Sony has thankfully jettisoned the dreadful Universal Media Disc (UMD) format that added so much weight to the [PlayStation Portable](#). Instead, games come on tiny cards that are about as wide as and slightly longer than a quarter. You can also download games, movies and TV shows from Sony's PlayStation store, but be warned: If you plan on building a big library you'll need to invest in Sony's proprietary memory cards, which run from \$20 for 4 gigabytes to \$100 for 32 gigabytes.

Besides the games mentioned above, the highlights of the Vita's launch lineup include "Hot Shots Golf: World Invitational," the shoot-'em-up "Super Stardust Delta" and the brawler "BlazBlue: Continuum Shift Extend." The PlayStation Store also offers a broad range of older games, so now's a good time to catch up on worthwhile PSP titles, like "Patapon 2" or "Tactics Ogre: Let Us Cling Together," that you may have missed.

The Vita has a couple of built-in social apps. "Near" lets you see what

other Vita players in your neighborhood are up to, while "Party" lets you chat with friends over the PlayStation Network - even if you're playing different games. More popular apps like Facebook, Twitter and Flickr are on the way.

How much the Vita will set you back depends on how you intend to download games and connect with friends. The WiFi-only model costs \$249. For \$299, you get WiFi and the ability to access AT&T's 3G mobile broadband network, which starts as \$15 per month and limits users to 250 megabytes of data.

Game prices range from \$10 for PSP classics to \$50 for brand-new releases like "Uncharted: Golden Abyss." That's going to make the Vita a tough sell to smartphone gamers who are used to software costing a couple of bucks.

But, like I said, the Vita isn't designed to replace a smartphone. If you just want another machine that can play "Angry Birds," you're missing the point; the Vita is targeted at gamers who want to take PlayStation-quality games on the road, and it delivers beautifully.

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