

A Closer Look: Stream-box gaming is a mixed bag

September 29 2014, by Ron Harris



This Monday, Sept. 29, 2014 photo shows the Amazon Fire TV, a product for streaming popular video services, apps and games in high-definition, in Decatur, Ga. Several popular game titles, including "Minecraft-Pocket Edition," are available for Fire TV, which runs on an operating system based on Google's Android OS. (AP Photo/Ron Harris)

As gaming consoles such as the Xbox and the PlayStation diversify into video, social media and other non-gaming apps, it seems only fair that streaming TV devices start nudging into gaming territory.

Amazon's Kindle Fire TV and the Roku 3 both offer a multitude of games, alongside apps to stream video on the big television screen from services such as Netflix and Hulu. The [game](#) offerings—some free, some for a fee—are a mixed bag thus far, ranging from solid to silly.

Here's a look at the experience for both:

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— Amazon Fire TV (\$99; optional game controller \$40):

The Fire TV is an ideal type of multimedia streaming box to bring gaming to the living room. It has a quad-core processor and a dedicated graphics chip to speed up gaming visuals. It pumps all that out in [high definition](#) at 1080p.

Games such as "Riptide GP2" and "The Walking Dead" are graphically pleasing, with engaging action and fast-responding controls. These aren't merely dumbed-down versions of games for other systems, such as personal computers and Microsoft's Xbox One. The top-tier titles on Fire TV play as smoothly as they do elsewhere.

The games are affordably priced, too, starting at 99 cents and going as high as \$10 for such games as "Castle of Illusion Starring Mickey Mouse." Most of the paid games are \$3. You can usually use the regular controller that comes with the Fire TV, but the \$40 game controller, with thumb sticks and trigger buttons, is a necessity for the best action games.



This Sept. 29, 2014 photo shows the Roku 3, a product for streaming popular video services, apps and games in high-definition, in Decatur, Ga. Popular game titles, including "Angry Birds," are available for the Roku 3. (AP Photo/Ron Harris)

Because the Fire TV uses a version of Google's Android system, you're also getting a slew of casual games. Game developers, however, tweak their apps and make them available through Amazon's app store, so you're not getting everything available on Android phones.

The game categories to choose from include action, adventure, board games and kids, but not all of them have a substantial library. For instance, the kids category has only five titles. That's pretty paltry. It's something Amazon might want to address if it wants Fire TV gaming to take off.

Duds such as a Dracula-themed video pinball game are a waste of space.

The initial download is free, but the game will try to nibble you to spend 99 cents apiece for pinball theme add-ons. Most importantly, the game play has an awful amount of lag. The flippers don't flip the instant you press the buttons on the remote, making it frustrating to time your shots at all.

In all, the Fire TV is a great choice for streaming video. The gaming component doesn't embarrass itself, but it doesn't excel either. If Amazon can lure a few more top-flight game developers, Fire TV could become more appealing to enthusiastic part-time gamers.

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— Roku 3 (\$99):

The Roku 3 device offers a ton of games, but they range from very good to downright awful. It leans heavily toward casual gaming, meaning puzzle and word games with an occasional faster action title thrown in.

For instance, I had a great time playing "Angry Birds" on the Roku 3 using its Wii-like motion-sensing remote, which is included. I've played "Angry Birds" on many phones, tablets and traditional computers, and this beats them all. I simply held down the "OK" button on the remote and stretched the bird back on the slingshot by pointing the remote to the left. It's intuitive and beautifully displayed in 1080p high definition.

I went to the games channel on the Roku 3 to see the available titles and found most of them priced at \$1.99. I'm willing to experiment at that price, enduring a few bad games to find a couple of winners. But some of those puzzle and word games look, feel and play awfully dated. I do praise Roku for stocking a 99-cent version of the old-school classic "Rogue."

I settled in for a demo session of "Pathogen 2." Level One started with me flying a little spaceship inside the patient's femoral artery and trying to shoot down green gobs of pathogens. It's like "Asteroids" but with molecules. I quickly finished the first two levels and then got the nag screen asking me to pony up cash for additional levels. It blatantly asks, "Why would you deprive yourself for less than a buck?"

And that really is the key with much of the game selection on the Roku 3. Pricing something at 99 cents—or even \$1.99—often made me think, "Why not?"

All of this makes Roku 3 at best a delivery system for [casual games](#). Roku has only 86 games available and needs more heavy-hitter titles alongside "Angry Birds" to truly compete against the Fire TV's 365 titles, or for that matter my Android smartphone.

More information: Amazon Fire TV: amzn.to/Zg72oE

Roku 3: bit.ly/1ry6Dsk

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