

Review: Amazon Fire TV Stick doesn't match Chromecast, Apple TV or Roku

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Amazon is determined to be a player in the market for digital media devices, gadgets that allow users to stream movies, television shows and

music from the Internet to their televisions and living room entertainment centers.

Earlier this year, the e-commerce giant launched the Fire TV, its answer to Apple TV, long the most popular streaming media device.

Now, the company has released its version of Google's Chromecast, the inexpensive media player that looks something like a pack of gum.

Dubbed the Fire TV Stick, Amazon's new device is similar in size to the Chromecast and costs less than half the original Fire TV but does many of the same things as its bigger sibling.

The Stick is bargain-priced and offers an easy way to connect Amazon fans with the company's music, movies and TV shows. But folks who aren't as tied to Amazon will likely find rival gadgets more compelling.

Like Amazon's other devices, such as Fire TV and the company's Fire tablets, the Fire TV Stick primarily serves as a conduit to the company's own digital media offerings.

Its interface includes special sections devoted to the company's subscription-based Prime video service and to its stores that sell and rent movies and TV shows.

It also includes areas devoted to videos and songs that owners have purchased from Amazon and photos they have stored in the company's cloud.

In that way, it works much like Apple TV, which originally focused on Apple's own services.

Although it doesn't display them as prominently as Amazon's services,

the Stick does offer access to plenty of other apps. Users can access Netflix, Showtime, YouTube and Hulu Plus through the device.

However, it doesn't have direct access to content that users have bought from either Apple's iTunes or Google's Play Store. Nor does it have anywhere close to the broad selection of Internet channels that you can get through Roku's devices.

One prominent app it's missing is HBO Go, although Amazon says that should be coming soon.

One of the standout features of the original Fire TV was its ability to play a wide range of games. The Stick offers a similar capability. Owners can choose from more than 200, most of which were originally designed for smartphones and tablets.

Because the Stick is a less powerful device than the first Fire TV, it can't play some of the more graphically complicated games that are available for its predecessor. That's unfortunate because that leaves out most of the notable games in Amazon's Fire TV store, including such titles as "The Walking Dead" game and "Minecraft."

What you're left with is a bunch of relatively obscure casual games. You won't find "Angry Birds" or "Candy Crush Saga" or anything like that.

The other standout feature of the Fire TV was that it allowed users to search for movies and other content by talking into a microphone built into its [remote control](#). The Stick has the same voice search capability, but it doesn't include the microphone-enabled remote.

Instead you have to access it through the Fire TV smartphone app. Unfortunately, that app isn't yet available for the iPhone.

I found the voice search feature worked well, easily recognizing when I wanted to find "Breaking Bad," "Walking Dead" and "Battlestar Galactica." But it only searches the listings of a handful of apps. If you want to search Netflix for a movie, for example, you can't use the voice search feature. Instead, you'll have to search from within its app.

That's a shortcoming the Stick shares with the Fire TV. And it's not the only one.

Like its bigger sibling, the Stick has a cluttered and difficult-to-navigate interface. The home screen is a jumble of apps, games, individual videos and promoted [episodes](#) that can be hard to parse. And browsing for individual titles can be a chore because apps, movies and TV shows are listed in long horizontal lines that users have to scroll through a screen width at a time.

But the Stick has other drawbacks. It's slightly longer than either the Chromecast or the Roku Streaming Stick. Because of the way my TV curves in back, that meant I couldn't plug the Stick directly into its side-facing HDMI port. Amazon does include a short extension cable for such situations, but it's a somewhat kludgy solution.

An even bigger drawback is the Stick requires significantly more power than the Chromecast or the Roku Streaming Stick. I could power both of those devices using the USB port in the back of my TV, meaning they could be completely hidden from view.

Not so the Fire TV Stick. It needs to be plugged into a power outlet, so you are likely going to have a visible cable coming down from the back of your TV, defeating some of the allure of buying such a discrete device.

The Stick doesn't stack up to its rivals in other ways.

Roku's Streaming Stick not only offers far more channels, its [search feature](#) combs through the listings of more of them than the Stick's.

Chromecast is less expensive and makes it much easier to stream content from your computer to your TV.

Apple TV works much better with iPhones, iPads and Macs.

And all three devices allow you to access at least some of Amazon's media offerings either directly through apps or indirectly by beaming content from a smartphone or computer.

So unless you're heavily invested in Amazon's devices and services, I'd look at devices other than the Fire TV Stick. It may be inexpensive, but you'll get more for your money with rival gadgets.

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What: Amazon Fire TV Stick

Likes: Inexpensive; small; accurate [voice search](#) feature; ability to play games; access to a range of apps and services.

Dislikes: Has to be plugged into a power plug; few notable games available; larger size may not fit easily in some TV ports; search doesn't work with most apps or services; cluttered, confusing interface.

Price: \$39

Web: amazon.com

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