

Preview: Shadow streaming service may succeed where OnLive, others failed

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The biggest obstacle for Blade's Shadow service is the past.

Despite the promise of high-end PC gaming at the fraction of the price, services such as Nvidia's GeForce Now and PlayStation Now haven't caught fire. Worse yet, OnLive, the pioneer in the field, went kaput, casting doubt on the viability of the technology.

Part of the reason is that all these services are closed systems. Players who buy into them are restricted to playing on certain devices. Shadow takes a different approach. Blade opens up its streaming [service](#) to virtually any device and lets players treat it like any standard PC. The big difference is that instead of running on local hardware, the service lets players run their games remotely off a Xeon processor with 12 GB of DDR4 Ram, an Nvidia graphics card that's the equivalent of a GTX 1080 and 256 GB of [hard drive](#) space.

With that power, they can run nearly any [game](#) at max settings. It can even run hardware intensive applications such as Adobe Photoshop. The Shadow service essentially turns nearly any computer into a \$2,000 gaming rig. On smartphones and tablets, it uses the screen like a monitor and players can use a Bluetooth controller to make the game perform like something on a console.

Shadow could run the full "Fortnite" without compromises on an iPhone before "Fortnite" widely came out as an app on the App store. What's more important is that the service acts like a PC because it is a PC except that the system runs on a data center. This freedom lets players install Steam and run mods for games that they own on the service. They can add Battle.net and play "Overwatch" on a tablet.

Another important element about Shadow is that Blade dedicates computing resources for every

player. That means there shouldn't be a drop off in clarity or performance and the service can only grow as far as its hardware. In France where the company launched, it limited the number of people who could initially access the service until they had enough computers.

That means the only questions facing Shadow is lag and stability. The company says it has built an end-to-end system that's streamlined so that it works with minimal input delay. It functions so well that professional "Street Fighter" player Olivier "Luffy" Hay uses the service. I can attest that the service works flawlessly from the limited time I used it, but there are reports that actual use is less than stellar.

I played "Rise of the Tomb Raider" on max settings on a laptop and continued the game on phone a few minutes later. Shadow started the game where I left off and the screen in both cases looked impressive without many noticeable artifacting. In fact, I did another test where I had two identical laptops next to each other, and I couldn't tell the difference until one ran Adobe Photoshop faster than the other. (The faster one was using Shadow.)

The service has plenty of potential and could be a reasonable alternative to a gaming rig. Players don't have to worry about upgrading it. They can run nearly any peripheral, application or game. The only thing that gives me pause is the size of the hard drive. At 256 GB of storage, that's not a lot for players with massive game collections. At this point, Blade says it has no plans to let players upgrade their 256GB of space so they'll have to delete games on the service to make room for more.

The service costs \$35 per month with a locked-in annual subscription. It is costlier if players pay for it each month or in three-month segments. At the moment, Shadow is only available in California and select areas of Europe.

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