

Video Game Feature: Hands-On With the Sony PlayStation Vita

Submitted by [BrianTT](#) [1] on February 8, 2012 - 3:31pm

- [Brian Tallerico](#) [2]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [3]
- [Little Big Planet](#) [4]
- [Little Deviants](#) [5]
- [Mortal Kombat](#) [6]
- [PlayStation Vita](#) [7]
- [PSP](#) [8]
- [SCEA](#) [9]
- [Sony](#) [10]
- [Uncharted](#) [11]
- [Uncharted: Golden Abyss](#) [12]
- [Unit 13](#) [13]
- [Video Game Review](#) [14]

CHICAGO – It feels like there’s a new must-have electronic toy every quarter. Do you have an iPad 2? iPhone 4S? Nintendo 3DS? Whatever that obnoxious SuperBowl commercial with The Darkness was shilling? It can get exhausting, especially if you don’t have the expendable income to get them all. So why should you buy a Sony PlayStation Vita? Why get another toy if something else will simply replace it three months later? Having been lucky enough to get an exclusive, hands-on sneak preview of the Vita, I can tell you this — Sony has developed an incredibly impressive machine, one that will surprise you with its functionality and versatility. In many ways, it is the ultimate gaming toy, taking elements of handhelds that have worked before and merging them with the new socially-intertwined landscape.



PlayStation Vita
Photo credit: Sony

First, let’s hit a few bullet points of unique functions of the Vita before detailing our hands-on experience with the games available for it:

The first thing one notices when picking up a Vita is that it is awfully familiar. The design is very similar to the Sony PSP. It’s a little bigger and features two analog sticks along with a back touch pad, but it is very clearly a relative of the Sony handheld that came before. But everything about it feels like an improvement on the PSP. It’s physically bigger but not as heavy. The screen is vibrant and large (five inches) for a handheld. The controls are well-mapped and responsive. It feels like the “right” size for a machine like this one and it was a smart decision to not stray too far from the model of what worked before for Sony.



Uncharted: Golden Abyss for the PS Vita

Photo credit: Sony

In fact, the first major difference one will notice is in the interface. The traditional XMB is gone in favor of something that will look much more familiar to iPhone and iPad users. Icons like games, libraries, and social functions pop up on one screen and the user can swipe to move to another screen like an in-pause game. Most of the action outside of gaming (and sometimes even in, which we'll get to) are touch screen-based. And it's the integration of the touch screen, Sixaxis controls, and other bells and whistles to the basics of gaming that clearly has excited developers. All four of the games I demoed at this preview involved heavy touch screen usage. But is it a gimmick (like I would argue the Kinect and Nintendo 3D gaming turned out to be) or the next phase in gaming?

Before we get to the games, a few more interesting things to note about the Vita:

1. This is one of the coolest things I've heard in the history of gaming development. For some games, you'll be able to merge your experience with your PS3 gaming world. In other words, you can play a game on your PS3, earn XP or unlock items, save your experience to the cloud, download it on your Vita, and go. The PSP was always rumored to be incredibly functional with the PS3 but it never quite lived up to that potential. The idea that a player could start a season in, for example, a sports game on the road and continue their schedule at home is truly a step forward in turning these machines into partners instead of merely parallel players.



Unit 13 for the PS Vita

Photo credit: Sony

2. There's clearly a heavy emphasis on social networking and it's more than just bragging about your high score on Facebook. There's a feature called Near, in which you can interact with and see high scores of the people around you who have also turned on their Wi-fi or 3G capability (and, yes, you will have to pay a monthly fee to AT&T for 3G). Not only can you compete with friends in your neighborhood, some games will utilize this feature in unique ways. Let's say I unlock a mission in a game. I can give it to someone on my Near network. The lovely Jennifer Hallett, Senior Software Specialist for Sony, who ran the presentation even ran a mind-blowing possible function by me — location-based exclusive content. Let's say you're in New York City and you turn on ModNation Racers. There could be an exclusive Empire State Building track for you to play. (Which makes one envision a world in which kids beg their parents to go on certain vacations just to get certain content). You'll even be able to jack in with your BlueTooth and chat with other people on your Near network. The concept of a gaming network is clearly being conceived as a HUGE PART of the experience with a Vita, not just an Add-on.

3. The PSP was originally pitched as a do-it-all entertainment machine with buyers encouraged to buy UMD movies and listen to music on it as well. It feels like the Vita is going back to gaming as its priority. When asked if it will play movies and TV shows downloaded from the PSN library, the answer is yes, but it's clearly more of an afterthought. You use this to game, social network, talk to your friends, and if you feel like watching an episode of "The Walking Dead" on it, you can do that too.

What about the games? Click to page two for details on what we were able to play including a rare opportunity with the upcoming Vita version of “Mortal Kombat.”

“Little Deviants”



Little Deviants

Photo credit: Sony

It started with this pick-up-and-play title, a game that even comes bundled in one of the versions available of the PlayStation Vita. It's essentially a platforming game that is designed to show off the potential of the machine you just spent your hard-earned babysitting money on buying. I was shown two levels that were clearly designed with this in mind. In one, your “Little Deviants” character is rolling around a landscape that you shift and “push” with the back touch pad. It takes some getting used to. At first, I just wished I could control it with the traditional controls. But you get used to it — pushing your guy around, collecting stars, avoiding enemies, and reaching the end of the level. The second level turns the machine into an augmented reality device. You hold it up and the camera on the other side of the machine turns the room you are in into a shooting gallery where you try to blast character with the shoulder buttons. I can't wait to see people on the bus swinging their Vita around and shooting at objects that only they can see.

First Impressions Verdict: A fun title that reminds someone of “Little Big Planet,” but might be a little too light on creativity for some players. It seems like a perfect fit for a bundle because it shows off the unique functions of the Vita. Players will unwrap the Vita and think it's relatively similar to the PSP. This game will show them how it's different.

“Uncharted: Golden Abyss”



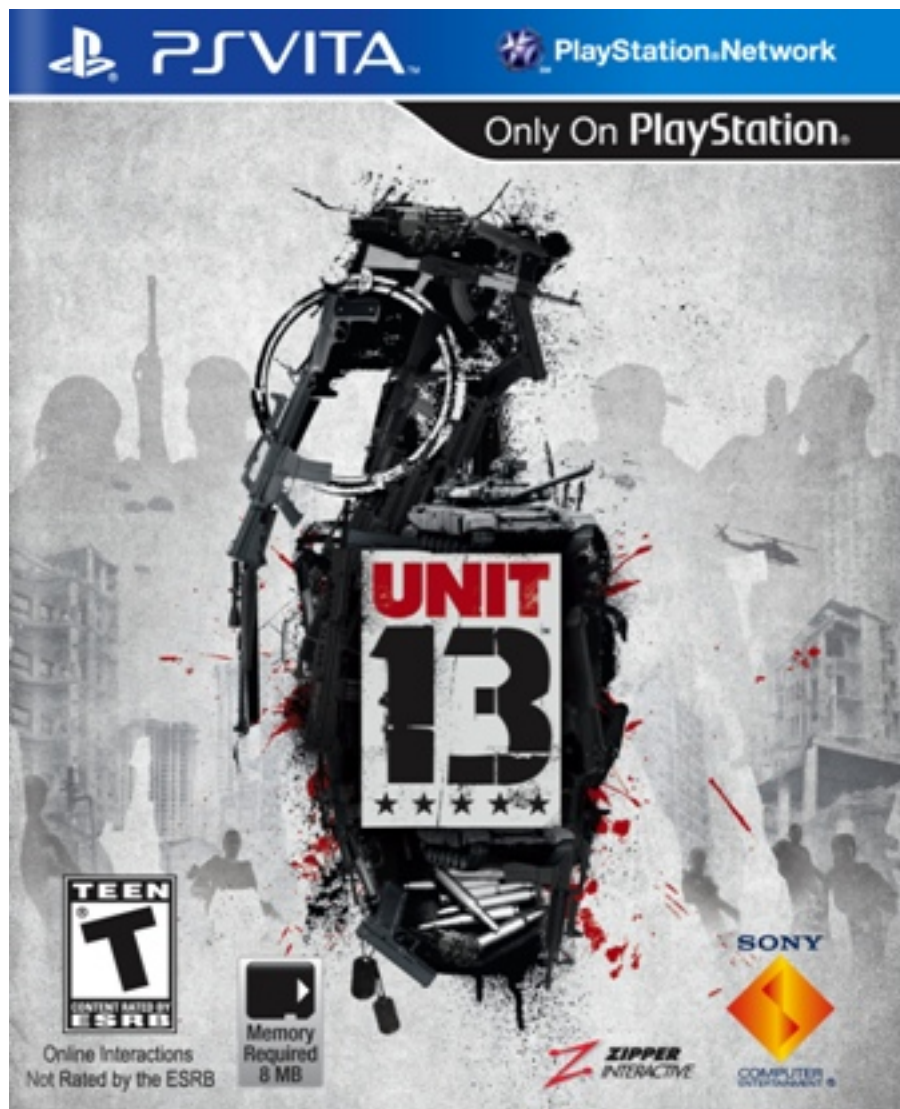
Uncharted: Golden Abyss

Photo credit: Sony

Considering the influential, landmark caliber of the PS3 adventures of Nathan Drake, this has to be the most anticipated launch title for most players. It was surely the one I was most excited to play. Jen fired up chapter 4 and the first thing I said was, “God, it looks great.” The framerate, shading, responsiveness — it’s the best-looking handheld game that I’ve ever seen. As Drake escapes a burning building in this prequel adventure (he’s always escaping collapsing buildings somewhere), Jen showed off the touch screen functionality of the title. You can swipe to move or interact with objects in the game. At one point, I reached a blockade and swiped to cut through it. At another, I had to use the Sixaxis controller and balance on a beam with the entire machine. Another chapter featured Nathan picking up a sniper rifle, zooming in, and I could actually lift the Vita and use the display as my scope. Moving it to the target without traditional controls.

First Impressions Verdict: It’s going to blow you away. I was skeptical that a game could merge the unique controls of the Vita with traditional ones, but it was seconds before I was swiping, lifting, and balancing along with what one already expects from this award-winning franchise. Your Vita isn’t doing its job if you don’t have this game and I can’t wait to get back into it.

“Unit 13”



Unit 13
Photo credit: Sony

It won't be released until March 6th, but developer Ara Demirjan, Associate Producer at SCEA, was there to show me his baby, a clever take on the shooter that, once again, truly shows off what the Vita can do. Imagine a game where you can reload with a tap of the screen. Or pick up new weaponry with a finger. "Unit 13" is a mission-based shooter in which the player has short (5-20 minutes) missions to complete and earns points based on streaks or creativity. Compete with your friends. Earn stars. Or even compete and play with people near you. Ara explained how the game will allows players to share unlocked missions. Let's say you're on a bus and your buddy has unlocked something you haven't. He can share it with you through the network. It seems like a title built for DLC (new missions, weapons, etc.) and Mr. Demirjan confirmed this was something they were discussing.

First Impressions Verdict: It's a pick-up-and-play shooter that merges campaign mentality with multi-player. In other words, if it's a hit, it could be a game-changer as to what we expect from an FPS. I felt some limitations of the machine here for the first time when I tried to shoot a guy through a bucket and realized that the environments weren't responsive at all, but all I know is this and it's all that really matters — I want to play it again.

"Mortal Kombat"

As a final demonstration, the man who developed the latest incarnation of "Mortal Kombat," Brian Lebaron, introduced me to the Vita version of his title, expected to hit in May. That very morning, Brian was still tweaking his baby, adding a little fluff to a teddy bear that was being destroyed. A perfect fit for the Vita, "Mortal Kombat" is being imported, enhanced, and upgraded in fascinating ways. EVERYTHING from the console version (including DLC characters) is included along with dozens of new Challenge Tower levels that employ Vita technology. For example, in one you'll have to stay alive while tapping missiles falling at you with your finger. In another, blood splatters against the screen and you have to wipe it away. And get this — you can perform fatalities with the touch screen. If it's forward-forward-back-back, just do that with your finger. Lebaron admits that the ease of fatalities (and you can activate X-Ray attacks with a tap as well) is because handheld gamers are a bit more casual. The demonstration ended with getting to play Mr. Lebaron ad-hoc. Yes, I got to fight the guy who makes "Mortal Kombat." I'm pretty sure he let me win.

First Impressions Verdict: Pre-order it when you buy your Vita. It's a beauty.

Final Thoughts

I have to admit that I went into this hands-on demonstration with a heavy dose of skepticism. I don't think the PSP ever lived up to its potential and I think the Nintendo 3DS has been a disappointment at best. I feel a bit of "new toy exhaustion," worn out by the idea that as soon as I buy a new phone, tablet, or computer that it's outdated. For the first time in a long time, I feel like something is hitting the market that is not only not instantly outdated but ahead of its time. It's a merge of everything you like in a handheld gaming machine from your iPhone gaming experience to what you know expect from an amazing company like Sony (without that gimmicky 3D thing to give you a headache). It looks beautiful and it incorporates the social networking trend for the first time that feels like more than an add-on. It's a fully immersive experience. And the minute I left the hands-on, I just wanted to play it again.

The Sony PlayStation Vita will be available for \$249-\$349 (Wi-Fi, WiFi/3G, and Bundle determining price) on February 22nd, 2012.

Stay tuned to HollywoodChicago.com for more coverage of the Sony PlayStation Vita and a special thanks to Jennifer Hallett, Ara Demirjan, Brian Lebaron, and everyone who made this opportunity a possibility.



[15]

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Source URL (retrieved on Apr 25 2024 - 7:30am):
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