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Sony Ericsson Xperia Play



Chris Hall, Editor

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Quick verdict

As a smartphone the Xperia Play is reasonable enough and the gaming controls are great, however, the lack of really exciting games at launch is a little disappointing. Software and game development could turn this around, but in these early days, we'd wait a little longer

For

- Gaming pad is well designed
- Sony Ericsson's take on Android has some nice features and is easily compensated where it lacks features
- Battery life when gaming is pretty good

Against

- Gaming delivery is a little disparate
- Screen needs to be brighter
- It really needs some exciting gaming titles
- Video capture is unnecessarily poor



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(Pocket-lint) - The Sony Ericsson Xperia Play could be the stuff of legend: the Holy Grail of the PlayStation phone has been subject to rumour and speculation for many years. With the meteoric rise of mobile gaming, thanks largely to the [iPhone](#), an Android device that grasps gaming literally with both hands was inevitable. But can the Xperia Play break into the mainstream in a way that the [PSP Go](#) failed to do?

The Xperia Play has curves and buttons in places that draw your eyes to them. It's glossy, there are interesting angles and it's definitely an interesting phone to look at. The Play follows some of the design lines laid down following Sony's "human curvature" design we've seen before. The back of the phone is curved like the [Vivaz](#) was, and the new [Xperia Neo](#) and [Pro](#) are. The aim is to make it sit naturally in the hand, but the real challenge here is to make it comfortable when held for gaming and for using as a regular phone. Yes, it is a comfortable device to make phone calls on and we had no problems with call quality in our tests.

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It's a hefty bit of kit, measuring 119 x 62 x 16mm, but to be fair, it packs a gaming controller into the mix, so that 16mm of thickness isn't excessive, only a little larger than similarly designed QWERTY phones. The Xperia Play slips comfortably into your pocket, ready for any-time gaming action, so it isn't an issue. It weighs 175g, towards the top end of smartphones, but again, this is a phone with a difference.

The phone is dressed in plastics with a glossy finish, which not only attract fingerprints, but we also found various design points attracted dust or pocket-lint, especially along the top of the narrow line of four control buttons that arc across the bottom of the screen. Yes, making these touch controls would have been cleaner, but once you deploy this as a gaming device, physical buttons work better as touch buttons could be too easily brushed as you play those games.

We raised a slight concern about the location of the buttons on the Sony Ericsson Xperia Arc, as the back button lies too close to some of the on-screen options, so accidental presses were frequent. The Play doesn't suffer from that problem to the same degree, but we did on occasion find ourselves archiving Gmail messages when we intended to go back to our message list.

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The biggest nod to gaming from the “outside” of the Xperia Play is the two shoulder buttons, aping those you find on a PlayStation controller. The left and right buttons sit either side of a central volume control. Up to this point, apart from those shoulder buttons, this could have been a QWERTY slider, and we’re sure there will be some who think it is at first glance. Slide it open and the Play reveals its true purpose.

The PlayStation Certified logo sits in the bottom left-hand corner. It's a subtle mark, not detracting from the central XPERIA name as though Sony didn't want to run away with Ericsson's glory. Not that there could be any confusion when you look at the layout of controls, the four distinctive controller buttons on the right hand-side leave you with no doubt that you're holding the PlayStation phone. Start and Select make an appearance along with a menu button so you don't have to reach around the side to the menu button beneath the screen. The four-way pad sits to the left and centrally you have two analogue touch pads.

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The gaming deck isn't showy or adorned with bright colours: it's metal grey, sophisticated and somewhat understated. The flat profile of the buttons looks excellent, but markedly different from the typical Sony Ericsson buttons on the "outside" of the Play, so some might say that the Xperia Play isn't the most cohesively designed.

The power/standby button sits on the top, which falls under the left hand when in gaming mode. It sits flush with the bodywork which it needs too - otherwise you'd press it when you gripped the Play in the throws of gaming. That said, we have put it into standby mid-game, but it's good that you can suspend gaming easily - in fact it's critical for a mobile gaming device where you might want to jump in and out of games.

Power the Xperia Play on and you are greeted with Android 2.3.2, lightly skinned with Sony Ericsson's take on Android. It isn't the most aggressive customisation we've seen and we like that fact. As normal you are presented with a number of customisable homepages and Sony Ericsson provide a range of widgets. Some of these are pretty lightweight - their calendar widget is essentially useless and there is no sign of things like weather. However, you will add widgets as you expand the apps you have on the phone, so there is always the chance to add more regular Android widgets as and when you see fit.

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There are, however, a couple of unique widgets specifically for the gaming remit of this device. The first is a PlayStation Pocket widget (there are large and small versions) that let you launch your PlayStation Pocket games directly, or open the PlayStation Pocket app. Crash Bandicoot, the

1996 PlayStation port, comes pre-loaded on the device and so occupies this space alone unless you head off online to buy more, such as CoolBoarders 2 or Syphon Filter. The second gaming widget is a link to the Get Game app, which offers up a selection of titles designed for the Xperia Play.

Otherwise the skin that Sony Ericsson have applied to the Xperia Play is essentially the same as it is on the Xperia Arc. It isn't as all-encompassing as something like HTC Sense, but offers tweaks at many levels, from contacts to the settings menu. We actually like the lighter touch that Sony Ericsson have applied, and like LG and Samsung, it gives you the feeling that you have slightly more freedom to do everything exactly as you wish.

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Some of the smart moves aren't immediately obvious, like the fact that you can add a folder to the dock at the foot of the homepages and call it whatever you like. So, for example, you could create a "Social" folder and dump Twitter, Facebook and Foursquare in there, which makes it a good way to give you instant access to your favourite apps. Of course, you can always dump apps, shortcuts and contacts onto the homepages in a flash.

You also get a widget for Sony Ericsson's Timescape application. This is SE's take on social networking, looking to pull in updates from Twitter and Facebook and run them into your SMS messages to create a tiled stream of social consciousness. We've never been totally sold on the execution of Timescape (although it works here better than it did on the previous generation of Sony Ericsson devices), as you can only really ever see one "tile" at a time, whereas if you use a regular app like Twitter for Android, you'd be able to see perhaps five. On top of that, Timescape only really regurgitates this social activity, it doesn't want to fully join in, so if you want to post photos to a specific gallery in Facebook or Check In on Places, you'll need the fully featured app.

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But if you don't like Timescape you can safely ignore it and you'll find that Android weaves it's normal magic to integrate your contacts so you'll get a full featured address book regardless of whether you take advantage of the Sony Ericsson applications or not. The contact book perhaps isn't the cleanest iteration of an Android address book, with a slight oddity splitting of SMS/MMS messaging into a envelope icon and everything else from the listed numbers, but it's a minor point.

Being an up-to-date Android phone you get all the benefits of the Android Market with its growing and increasingly competitive offering. That includes the likes of Adobe Flash 10.2 support, so you'll be able to snack on a more complete internet offering than some lesser rivals. In that regard, the Xperia Play has a relatively unfettered Android browser, which offers swift and slick navigation - and as always with Android, if you don't like it you can opt for Firefox, Opera, Skyfire or Dolphin if you prefer.

Android 2.3 also brings with it a new native keyboard however you won't see it on the Xperia Play, which uses Sony Ericsson's take on keyboards. It's ok, but not the smartest, doing its bit to offer up suggestions but not really able to correct typos to the same degree that the HTC keyboard will, or predict what you're writing like the excellent SwiftKey keyboard will - of course you can always download that instead. Annoyingly the keyboard

alternate character key is right next to the keyboard close button, so we found ourselves closing the keyboard by mistake on a number of occasions, especially when typing in portrait. The landscape keyboard is obviously larger, but you then find yourself gripping the bulk of the phone, so takes some getting used to.

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In many places the Android Market will swing in and enable you to alter the core phone offering to your liking and that's both one of the strengths of Android and one of the things that makes the Xperia Play work as a device - you can pretty much get it to do anything you want. Some areas aren't the best, like the video format support, or the lack of a network streaming client out of the box, but there is usually an easy (and free) solution waiting to help you out. The music player, for example, is pretty dull, and we can't help thinking that Sony Ericsson could have done more to support these media features better - this is, after all, a phone that it all about entertainment.

The experience is close to that of the Xperia Arc when it comes to performance, but one significant difference (outside of the drastically different form factor) is the screen. We're quite taken with the Xperia Arc screen, and the benefits that the Mobile Bravia Engine processing seems to apply. It's a shame that the 4-inch 854 x 480 display found on the Play isn't quite as adept as the 4.2-inch display on the Arc. It is vibrant enough, even if the whites are a little yellow, but it seems to lack brightness overall. This is something of a problem if you plan to be playing games next to the pool, or just sat at the back of the bus. The screen really needs to be brighter to cope with gaming in brighter conditions and that's a serious drawback for a device designed to be so visually engaging.

Under the bonnet the Xperia Play isn't the most powerful phone around. It packs in a 1GHz Qualcomm Snapdragon MSM 8255 processor backed by 512MB RAM, the same as the Xperia Arc and the experience is comparable for the most part. The phone is relatively swift in navigation and is mercifully lag free moving around the homepages. It isn't however, going to compete with the raw power of the likes of the [LG Optimus 2X](#), the showcase device for the Nvidia Tegra 2 chipset, which also has gaming firmly in its sights. Remember that mobile gaming was driven to this point today mostly by touchscreen gaming. The Xperia Play is really going to have to deliver games to garner attention from it's slightly overshadowed hardware position.

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We've already looked at game delivery to some degree [here](#), but for the sake of completeness, we'll cover it again here. To offer up your games, the Xperia Play comes with a number of different apps, which is a little confusing. Slide open the handset and the Xperia Play Launcher app

opens. This offers up some of your games, with nice big icons so you can launch them directly and get right to the fun. It also offers a link through to the Android Market where you can buy from a selection of “Xperia Play Optimized” games.

The second method of game delivery is through an app called Get Games. This is essentially a list which offers up the same Xperia Play Optimized titles from Android Market, as well as some others. Select the title you want and you’ll be taken to the appropriate point of purchase - so far we’ve seen games from Android Market and from Gameloft’s portal (Asphalt 6: Adrenaline is being offered as a free download from Gameloft, to ease you in). Sony Ericsson tell us that there are 60 titles designed for Xperia Play at launch, but most you’ll have seen before, and many you may already own. The difference will be that they may have had the controls altered to suit the gaming buttons on offer. We’ve been playing Asphalt 6 and Assassin’s Creed and found this to be the case, but some versions we’ve played so far, like Splinter Cell: Conviction, still had the original touch controls on the screen. Gameloft tell us that this won’t be the case forever, so we can expect cleaner adaption in the future.

But there is a third area for game delivery too. This is the PlayStation Pocket app which looks to serve up PlayStation classics: Crash Bandicoot is the title we've heard about since the launch of the Xperia Play in February. Crash Bandicoot comes preinstalled and sits all on it's lonesome in the PlayStation Pocket app, ready for some retro platforming action. If you want more, you'll have to buy these titles (again delivered through Android Market) and the list currently includes: Cool Boarders 2, Destruction Derby, Jumping Flash, MediEvil and Syphon Filter.

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Gameloft have already told us that their exclusive Xperia Play title [BackStab](#) is coming, but really, we'd want that on day one - preloaded. We'd always said that the Xperia Play was going to hang on the selection and delivery of games. Crash Bandicoot is great, but it isn't Metal Gear Solid or Tekken is it? The lack of exclusivity is a little disappointing and it's at this point that you have to remember that this is a mobile phone with a penchant for gaming: it isn't the next generation PSP.

At least the games are relatively affordable and you get the full selection of Android games too, such as Angry Birds, although if that's your definition

of mobile gaming, there is no benefit to having the Xperia Play. One area that does bring an aspect of exclusivity is online play, although we've yet to see what this really delivers yet. You'll be able to host local multiplayer games, as well as play online if the game allows it. We can see the opportunity for a cult multiplayer game, but do you back Sony Ericsson or the Nintendo 3DS to deliver it?

What does work though is the ergonomics. The layout and the action of the gaming controls feels right. Start playing the included Bruce Lee: Dragon Master and you'll be doing things that you couldn't feasibly do without those game controls. When not gaming, those game controls will also let you navigate around pages, so you can flick down a website and hit the X button to follow a link for example.

Those with larger hands might struggle to get to grips with the Xperia Play gaming controls, but you'll get used to bending that thumb just like you had to on the PSP, or a BlackBerry keyboard for that matter. The shoulder buttons work pretty well too, and the centrally located volume control can be reached if you need to make adjustments on the fly. The location of the charger socket and headphone jack on the left-hand side of the device also mean that both are out of the way if you want to play plugged in.

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The battery life is surprisingly good for gaming. We put it to the test and reached nearly 6 and a half hours of pretty much straight gaming ([you can read all about it here](#)). Outside of gaming, using the Xperia Play as a regular smartphone, we've found that we've got through an average day with problems. You'll be charging it every night, but you would with any other device of this ilk too. We suspect this performance partly comes down to the more efficient version of Android, the lower brightness of the screen, the 1500mAh battery and the restrained hardware. We also have a suspicion that if the Xperia Play was a power house you'd find the battery life was cut dramatically.

Around the back of the Play you'll find a 5.1-megapixel camera. This is, excuse the expression, bog standard in many ways. Where Sony Ericsson have lavished attention on the Xperia Arc camera, with its backlit Exmor R sensor and more advanced interface, the Xperia Play finds itself with a

straight Android camera interface. Why the disparity? Sony Ericsson have for a long time differentiated between devices on hardware and functions and even though they promised “entertainment unlimited” back in 2009, it seems that the Xperia Play gets marked down in the camera department. This is a gaming phone remember, you’re only interested in gaming, right?

Ironically, the Android camera offers a macro shooting mode, so we got more consistent macro shooting from the Play than we did from the Arc. The results, naturally, aren’t as good as you’ll get from the Arc, but they are just about average for a 5-megapixel Android smartphone. An LED “flash” offers support in darker conditions, but isn’t especially effective.

In a strange move, the video capture on the Xperia Play isn’t HD like the other Android phones we’ve seen of late. Instead, the “high quality” settings only offer you 800 x 480 pixels at 30fps. This might be alright for casual use and looks acceptable on the phone, but in this day and age of YouTube HD, you’d want to take advantage of higher settings. As a result, the video capture can only be described as disappointing.

Video capture, and the camera interface, is something that could easily be corrected with a software update and hopefully Sony Ericsson will make a

move to spice things up a little bit. We were told that the device we were testing was final retail software, but we're still a little suspicious of the occasional crashes we experienced, especially when it came to accessing Android Market. It wasn't anything critical, but happened often enough to make us wonder if there was a problem.

Verdict

Given the strong focus of the Xperia Play on gaming, it's difficult to cover every aspect of its phone capabilities. In terms of the user interface it is very similar to the Xperia Arc, so it's worth reading that review too if you are interested in learning more. As a phone we think the Xperia Play is pretty good, but not excellent.

As a gaming device we've had fun with it, but we're yet to be really blown away by a gaming title and this is something of a problem. Sony Ericsson needed a killer game to really get everyone excited about the Xperia Play: Crash Bandicoot isn't it. We're worried about the current line-up, but this is early days so we can afford to be a little lenient: developers can change the future of this phone from its current position as interesting to rather more compelling.

In these early days we'd cautiously take a step back and see what happens as the competition in Android phones is very strong. We're concerned about the decision not to make the Xperia Play a more advanced device from a hardware point of view. The screen, certainly, needs to be better and we're not altogether sure that if developers treat us to a wide range of advanced games for Android that the Xperia Play will have the power to cope. With premium handsets offering dual core processors elsewhere, the Xperia Play will need careful software development, with an emphasis on gameplay, if it is to really take hold.

Writing by Chris Hall.

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