

## OnLive: the future of gaming?

### Background

Thursday 22 September saw the UK launch of revolutionary new gaming service: OnLive.

OnLive is essentially games in the cloud. The advantage being that you don't need an expensive games console to play the games - you can stream them via your computer, and you don't need the latest, more expensive 25-core processor to run the games: if you can watch fullscreen YouTube videos on your computer, then chances are that you can also use OnLive.

So, we decided to give it a go....



### Setup

The setup process starts with a visit to the website, a relatively simple sign-up process and then the installation of a small app on your computer. Once OnLive is up and running, you're presented with a 9 x 9 grid menu screen. Most of the options are self-explanatory although we felt some help-text wouldn't go amiss.



Figure 1: The main menu

For example, the Arena is where you can go and spectate on other gamers using the system. As a seasoned gamer, my first reaction was that the Arena would be where I go to actually play games, as

it's a common term used in multiplayer modes. 'Spectate' or 'Watch current players' might be a better description, or even suggesting that it's a TV allowing you to tune in to watch games live.



Figure 2: The Arena

There's also a good level of thought that's gone into the social integration. Within the Arena, you can 'like' or 'dislike' a game. But as a player you can save clips where you've performed particularly well as a 'brag clip' and post the 10-second video to Facebook. You get to show off to your friends, and of course OnLive benefits from you advertising its system, at no cost to them.

## Playing

So how does it stack up against playing on a console or a standard, non-cloud game on your computer?

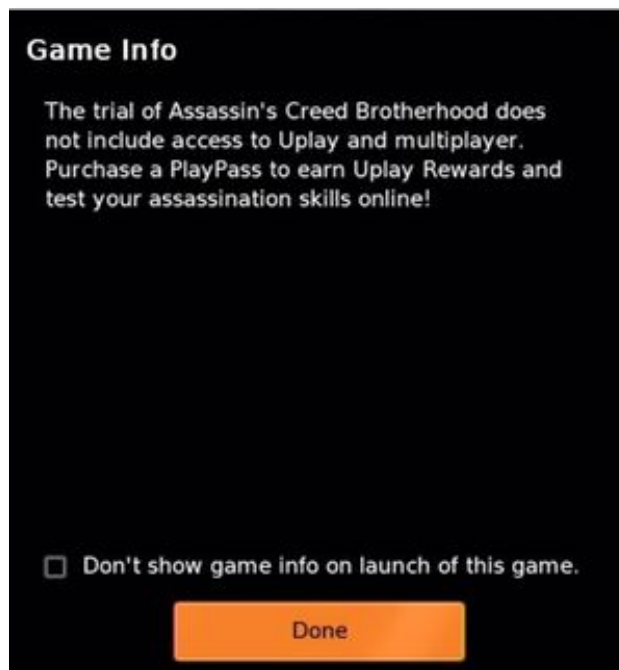
The answer is actually quite well, as long as you have a reasonably quick internet connection. OnLive state a minimum requirement of 2Mbps, and a recommended speed of 5Mbps. Given that the average broadband speed in the UK is just over 6Mbps it should work well for most people. How well it fares for those with slower connections remains to be seen, but that's more of an issue for the broadband providers than for OnLive. Plus, if it doesn't work because your connection is too slow, at least you haven't forked out loads of money for a console that you can't use.

In practice, a slow connection can rapidly kill any chance of enjoying the gameplay, with video quality rapidly degrading and a fair amount of lag. When you're trying to destroy that giant laser-wielding troll with some quick moves, lag does not a champion make. We also had a couple of moments where the connection dropped completely and reconnection took a while.



Figure 3: Network problems...

On a good internet connection (and average broadband speed is only going to increase) the system works surprisingly well. We tested a number of fast-paced games such as DiRT 3 and it felt no different to playing on a PC or console.



To play a game you must first visit the Market where you find the selection of available games. There's a generous 30-minute free trial of each game so you can try before you buy. Games are around the same price that you'd currently pay, although some have options to pay a reduced price for only a few days access. This stings slightly - given that the game distribution model is completely digital, you might expect a reduced price for games. But there are bundle offers on older games, such as £6.99 a month the get access to over 100 games - although the selection is preselected by OnLive.

Another factor that may well determine the OnLive's future success is how quickly new games reach the OnLive market. We'll wait and see. If it means you can play a game within minutes of its launch, OnLive could have a massive advantage over traditional consoles, and their 'traditional' software distribution methods, like pre ordering on Amazon or buying from the store, at least until the console manufacturers start to distribute more titles through downloads. And even then, OnLive means that you're playing straight away, rather than downloading multi-gigabyte files over your home broadband, where in the UK at least, download data quota capping would be a common hindrance,

Games launch really quickly, but the lengthy intros of most modern games makes you realise why the 30-minute free trial was needed. You also need some time to work out the controls for each game - although OnLive have done a good job of key mapping and giving in-game instructions as required. Nevertheless, most console devotees will want a controller. The good news is that you can use a number of existing standard controllers to play the game, such as the Logitech F510, or the Microsoft Xbox controllers for Windows. We've not tested the service with these, but would expect the in-game onscreen control instructions to adapt to the controller you're using.

## **Conclusion**

As more and more games consoles move to an online model for games distribution (including 'consoles' such as the iPad and iPhone), the barriers to a purely online service such as OnLive seem increasingly trivial. One interesting barrier, however, is that many UK households have broadband deals that include usage caps. This could be a major deterrent to signing up to OnLive - although deals between OnLive and ISPs could help overcome this.

In conclusion, the service works better than we expected, with the big caveat that you need a solid internet connection - ideally something around the 5mbps+ range.

There's also an OnLive TV adapter that removes the need for a computer altogether, so you can play direct through your TV. It comes at a price of £69.99, which seems very reasonable compared to most of the current generation of games consoles. Once we get our hands on one of these, there'll be a follow-up post to see how the experience compares to the computer-based service.

### **About PlayableGames**

PlayableGames has been studying (and playing) games for years. PlayableGames consists of a team of highly experienced gamers and user experience researchers, a team that shapes gaming experiences for console manufacturers and publishers in the UK and globally.

### **Contact details**

Ben Weedon  
Manager  
PlayableGames  
T: +44 (0) 20 7421 6487  
F: +44 (0) 20 7421 6477  
E: [ben.weedon@playablegames.net](mailto:ben.weedon@playablegames.net)  
[www.playablegames.net](http://www.playablegames.net)