

A hands-on look at Google's Stadia cloud game service

AFP | Paris

Gamers were counting down to Tuesday's launch of Google's feature-rich, on-demand offering Stadia. But is its bang as big as its much-advertised buck?

The agency had a chance to gain a first impression at the web behemoth's Paris office in advance of the launch as Google bids to raise the bar to new ultra high-definition heights in a gambit to win greater heft in a global video game industry worth an estimated \$135 billion.

A screen problem forced the Google team to scale back resolution to high-definition television quality while sampling four of the 12 games that will be available at launch.

Notwithstanding the glitch, the graphic quality certainly stood out. According to estimates by the US tech giant the computing power under the hood is ample enough to allow players not to worry about technical limitations of their own hardware causing lags or snaps in the action.

The depth of field, design finesse and color rendition all stood out for the showcasing of games from Mortal Kombat, Destiny 2, Shadow of the Tomb Raider as well as Gylt, an original production exclusively for Stadia from Spanish studio Tequila Works.

Image fluidity was also up to the mark. While Google's Chromecast Ultra device must be plugged into a TV for Stadia sessions, a custom Stadia controller connects via WiFi directly to Google servers where game software is hosted.

In essence, screens are just windows for viewing in-game activity being handled at data centers.

In usage terms, it's on par with using a home console in terms of seamless on-screen response to joystick movements -- although beyond that Stadia is touting much shorter boot-up times.

Whereas it can take some hours to install a purchased game on a console, Stadia gets to the starting line in seconds.

Even a small-scale test run using few servers could not erase all question marks, a key one being the quality and stability of the connection once there is the expected onrush of competitors firing up on November 18 and thereafter.

Does commute compute?

Another unknown is the extent to which one can play away from one's own home on a variety of media. Stadia is promising to allow gamers the possibility of starting off a session on one's television and then switching to a smartphone during, for example, a commute.

That functionality will not immediately be available although it may be possible to switch between media provided one uses a Google Pixel or a computer -- and connects using WiFi to make sure game play data moves quickly and reliably over the internet.

A roaming option is envisaged but when it will be available is not yet clear.

In addition, a corded connection is for the time being required to connect the controller to a computer or smartphone with TV gaming the only wireless option immediately.

Another issue with Stadia's current configuration is its limited catalogue. Just 12 games are available to date -- a drop in the ocean compared with PC or console title offerings.

A keen gamer seeking out very high graphic quality and almost no fluidity lag or downscaling will have to cough up for the privilege, with a 4K-capable TV, a top drawer smartphone and a high-speed internet connection.



A visitor plays a game at the Google Stadia booth during the Gamescom trade fair in Cologne, Germany

Afghan pomegranate growers squeezed as prices drop

Kandahar | Afghanistan

Pomegranate farmers in southern Afghanistan -- where growing the juicy fruit is an important alternative to opium poppy production -- say they are feeling the squeeze this year, with business blighted by chilly weather, pests and export woes.

The prized crimson fruit, globally renowned for its reputed health benefits, is a point of pride for Afghan farmers, particularly in Kandahar province, where luscious pomegranates the size of small melons dangle from trees.

Every autumn, Afghans start drinking pomegranate juice as the fruit bursts into season. Vendors pile carts high with gravity-defying pomegranate pyramids and offer fresh-squeezed beverages.

But some Kandahar farmers say a fungal infection and destructive insects are taking a bite out of this season's harvest, and they accuse neighbouring Pakistan of new tariffs that are hurting the export market.

Haji Abdul Manan, who has been growing fruit in southern Kandahar for about 30 years, said a springtime cold snap damaged pomegranate flowers, impacting about 40 percent of his crop.

Problems also came from "lice, flies and a fungal disease," he added, likening a type of greenfly to a natural disaster that had ruined more than 100 of the orb-shaped fruits daily.

"It is the duty of the Afghan government to spray all the gardens in Kandahar and to protect the pomegranates from diseases, but the government is not doing anything," Manan complained.

Apart from its sweet flavour, fans point to pomegranates' purported



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health benefits including high levels of vitamin C and antioxidants that are said to help protect the body.

"Kandahar's pomegranates are the world's best for flavour, colour, and several times Kandahar's pomegranates came first in competitions abroad," Nasrullah Zaheer, the head of Kandahar's chamber of commerce, said.

In Kandahar, a medium-sized pomegranate goes for the equivalent of about 15 US cents, but by the time the fruit reach Kabul they cost about three times that.

Tariffs?

Zaheer and several other farmers claimed Pakistan has this year imposed hefty tariffs on pomegranate imports which, despite a drop in yield in some parts of Afghanistan, has led to an oversupply in the domestic market and sharp price drops.

"It is not fair to increase it," Zaheer said. "That is why it is the traders are facing harm."

But the Pakistan embassy in Kabul denied such a drastic measure had been taken, saying Pakistan had raised duties only slightly because "Afghan exporters consistently understate the value of pomegranates and fruits".

Muhammad Hafeez, a fruit and vegetable seller at a market in Islamabad, said pomegranate supply from Kandahar had not been impacted.

"The supply is in bulk and the quality is good," Hafeez said.

Abdul Baqi Beena, deputy director of the Kandahar chamber of commerce, said about 40,000 to 50,000 tonnes of pomegranates were exported annually, including to India, Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

For years, Afghanistan and international donors tried to wean farmers from growing opium poppies by encouraging alternatives such as fruit crops.

But those efforts often failed as drug smugglers offered lucrative prices that normally far exceed the income from traditional agriculture.

The US Agency for International Development previously supported the farming of high-value crops, including pomegranates, as an alternative to opium production, but in recent years has shifted its focus to helping build export markets and supporting Afghan farmers that way.

"There is strong regional demand for high value Afghan products that generate sufficient profit to justify export cost," Daniel Corle, USAID team lead for development outreach and communications, said in an email.

"These include pomegranates, pine nuts, apricots, spices, gems, marble, and carpets, among others."

A year after arrest, Ghosn seeks to throw out case against him

Tokyo

One year ago, the sudden arrest at a Tokyo airport of Nissan boss Carlos Ghosn, one of the world's best-known and respected tycoons, sent shockwaves through the business world.

After 130 days languishing in a Japanese detention centre, Ghosn is now out on bail and vigorously proclaiming his innocence, seeking to have his case declared null and void -- even if legal experts and his own defence deem his chances unlikely.

The 65-year-old Brazil-born executive faces charges of deferring part of his salary until after his retirement and concealing this from shareholders, as well as syphoning off millions in Nissan cash for his own purposes.

Ghosn denies every charge and has accused prosecutors and even Japanese government officials of colluding in a "plot" with Nissan to find a way to destroy

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him, fearful he was seeking to merge the firm with France's Renault.

His defence team filed a motion on October 24 to throw out the case given what they allege is illegal activity by Nissan and the prosecution -- including seizing his wife's phone and searching private homes.

But even his own defence lawyer Takashi Takano is doubtful of success, telling AFP: "There are no precedents and Japanese courts are very reluctant to accept this type of argument."

Yasuyuki Takai, a former head of the special prosecutors' bureau in Tokyo, agreed: "This motion has zero chance of succeeding."

"The real goal of the lawyers is to get an acquittal. This motion can only serve to calm down the accused and to say publicly that the prosecutors and Nissan did terrible things," Takai told AFP.

'Hostage justice'

Independent lawyer Nobuo Gohara said it was "debatable" as to whether Ghosn even had a legal obligation to declare the alleged deferred salary and "in any case, it should not have led to an arrest".

"The Ghosn case was an enormous global shock which has uncovered very big problems in the way the Japanese system functions," Gohara told AFP.

"This case should never have existed. You can only think that the end goal was to arrest Carlos

Ghosn."

The world-famous executive, once revered in Japan for rescuing the struggling Nissan and who criss-crossed the globe in private jets as the head of a worldwide business, now faces 15 years in prison if convicted.

Defence and prosecution teams have held regular pre-trial meetings but Ghosn's team has complained that they do not yet have access to prosecution documents "proving" the tycoon's guilt. This has delayed progress towards a trial, and also explains why the defence has not yet itself produced what it says is cast-iron proof of Ghosn's innocence.

Around 99 per cent of trials in Japan result in a conviction and the global media attention given to the Ghosn case has shone a spotlight on the Japanese

justice system.

Suspects can be detained for several days without being formally charged and can be re-arrested many times, extending the period of detention -- a system critics dub "hostage justice" designed

to extract a confession.

Ghosn is now out on bail and has been able to enjoy some trips outside Tokyo with his daughter, while preparing for a trial expected to take place in the spring of next year.

His lawyers describe him as in relatively good spirits and combative, even though he remains banned from any contact with his wife Carole

-- a measure Takano slams as "stupid" and "useless".

"There is no justification... It's just a punishment," said the lawyer, adding he hoped the judges would relent before the Christmas holidays.

