Apple allows streaming games on iOS, but there’s a catch [Updated]

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New App Store Review Guidelines published by Apple today open the door for streaming game apps like Google Stadia and Microsoft’s xCloud to be available on iOS devices for the first time. But the guidelines also impose some onerous requirements on multi-game streaming subscriptions that could prove difficult for services to meet.

By way of summary, Apple’s new guidelines say that any streaming game apps simply have to “adhere to all guidelines” for non-streaming apps. That means “each game update must be submitted for review, developers must provide appropriate metadata for search, games must use in-app purchase to unlock features or functionality, etc.”

More than that, though, each game in a multi-game streaming subscription needs to be submitted separately for App Store review. That step is necessary so each game can “[have] an App Store product page, appear in charts and search, [have] user ratings and review… be managed with ScreenTime and other parental control apps, appear on the user’s device, etc.”

Besides being a logistical headache, this could also serve as

a licensing problem for some streaming game providers. A service like Stadia, for instance, will need to obtain not only the rights to stream third-party games as part of its service but also the rights to submit the game as a standalone streaming iOS app of some sort.

Individual streaming game apps on iOS can be collected in a singular "catalog app," similar to GameClub's collection of downloadable iOS games. But each individual game in that catalog "must link to an individual App Store product page." The service as a whole must also offer an in-app option for new subscribers, though users who subscribe outside the app will also be able to use it.

Apple also requires that streaming game subscriptions don't "disadvantage non-subscribers." That would seem to suggest that each individual streaming-game app would at least have to be minimally functional on its own, without a subscription, even if that just means providing a short, time-limited demo of the game in question. We've reached out to Apple for clarification on how, exactly, this might work for game streaming apps.

When contacted by Ars, Google representatives declined to comment on the new guidelines. Microsoft representatives did not respond to a request for comment from Ars.

[**Update:** In a statement provided to media outlets, Microsoft said "This remains a bad experience for customers. Gamers want to jump directly into a game from their curated catalog within one app just like they do with movies or songs, and not be forced to download over 100 apps to play individual games from the cloud. We're committed to putting gamers at the center of everything we do, and providing a great experience is core to that mission."]

Cracking the door open

It should be clear by now that Apple's game streaming guidelines differ significantly from those for other streaming subscription services on the App Store. Netflix doesn't have to submit individual movies for Apple's approval or offer each movie as its own "watching app," to cite one of many examples.

Microsoft noted as much in a statement last month, when App Store guidelines didn't allow streaming game apps at all. "[Apple] consistently treats gaming apps differently, applying more lenient rules to non-gaming apps even when they include interactive content," the company said at the time. "All games available in the Xbox Game Pass catalog are rated for content by independent industry ratings bodies such as the ESRB and regional equivalents."

Elsewhere in the new guidelines, Apple now allows for iOS apps that serve "as a stand-alone companion to a paid Web-based tool." Such apps are fine as long as they don't offer in-app purchases "or calls to action for purchase outside of the app." This carve-out seems particularly targeted at services like Basecamp's hey.com email, which got into a heated battle with Apple earlier this summer.

Apps that deal with real-world person-to-person experiences can now facilitate payments without using Apple's in-app purchasing tools, the company says. This exemption only applies to "one-to-one" experiences between two people, though, and not one-to-many broadcast situations.

Finally, "reader" apps like Netflix or Kindle (i.e. apps that exclusively make use of content or subscription purchased elsewhere) can now offer in-app account creation for any existing free tiers of service, as well as account management tools for current subscribers, without breaking Apple's rules.

Today's guideline changes come after Apple opened up its app

review process to allow for more feedback and flexibility from developers who run afoul of the company’s rules.

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