Astro’s Playroom is the perfect showcase for the PS5’s wild DualSense controller

As far as pack-in games go, *Astro’s Playroom* may not seem all that exciting at first. It’s not an instant classic like a bundled *Super Mario.*, nor something with the obvious appeal of *Wii Sports*. But Sony made a smart decision in giving *Astro* away to every PS5 owner: it might just be the ideal showcase for the console’s new DualSense controller.

The game itself is a fairly simple 3D platformer, but one that exudes charm. Everything is bright and colorful, and there are lots of fun little animations. If you leave Astro alone for too long, he’ll pull out a PSVR and start playing games on his own. (If the adorable robotic character looks familiar, it’s because it also starred in the PSVR title *Astro Bot: Rescue Mission*, another game designed to showcase new hardware.)

Everything takes place in a retrofuturistic world divided into several levels, though for this preview I’ll only be discussing the first, called “Cooling Springs.”

Cute as everything is, initially it seems generic. You start out at a beach collecting coins, jumping around, and smacking enemies with your little robot fists. It’s all very peaceful and charming; mechanical dolphins swim through the water, and you can knock around beach balls. Later, you’ll move on to other themed areas like a robot hotel and a frozen arctic region. It’s not particularly hard, but there’s a really playful tone. You’ll spend time sliding down icy ramps,

jumping off of diving boards, and figure skating around enemies. Littered around the level are all kinds of classic PlayStation Easter eggs (which I won't spoil for you right now).

But the most interesting thing about *Astro's Playroom* isn't how it plays — it's how it feels. Sony's new DualSense controller is its biggest gamepad redesign since it introduced twin sticks midway through the original PlayStation's life. And two of the showcase features are all about feel: there are triggers on the back with haptic feedback and variable tension, and the controller has much more subtle vibrations. Both are on display in *Astro*'s first stage.

The vibrations are noticeable almost immediately, and the variety is pretty incredible. You can feel bits of sand crunching when Astro is walking on a beach, there's a heavy plop when you jump into the water, and a satisfying tension when you pull on an elastic band. I especially loved the colder region where you can actually feel Astro shiver. What's remarkable is how distinct they all feel. Each sensation is accompanied by a sound effect from the DualSense's built-in speaker, and when you combine the physical and audio sensations, the experience becomes that much more immersive.

The same goes for the new haptic triggers. Normally, the R2 and L2 buttons perform like regular buttons, but during certain sequences, they offer feedback in the form of tension. Essentially, there are two states to the button press; you can easily press down halfway, but a full press requires a bit more force. As an example, in the opening level of *Astro*, there are side-scrolling sequences where the bot jumps around in a spring-powered mech suit. (Don't ask.) In order to do a short jump, you pull the trigger halfway, but to launch across the screen, you need to pull it all the way down. It makes big

leaps that much more satisfying since you have to add the extra force.

The level also makes use of other controller features. You can blow into the mic to spin a fan, use the touchpad to move a zipper, and there are the prerequisite motion controls. None of these are new like the vibration and haptic triggers, but it’s actually pretty impressive how many things Sony crammed into this gamepad.

Of course, it’s impossible to know how things will play out for the DualSense. *Astro’s Playroom* is an adorable little game made all the more charming thanks to these new features. But it was also designed explicitly to take advantage of them. *Wii Sports* was amazing, but only a few Wii games made motion controls anywhere near as compelling.

Right now, it’s not clear whether other games and developers will take advantage of the DualSense in the same way. Like HD Rumble on the Nintendo Switch, they could end up being a forgotten gimmick. But in the case of *Astro’s Playroom*, it’s at least an incredibly fun gimmick — and one that should make new PS5 owners plenty happy when the console launches on November 12th.

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