

Nintendo DSi widens playing field

By Seth Schiesel

NINTENDO'S newest toy, the DSi, fits in your pocket and demonstrates in a simultaneously profound and gigggle-inducing way that its makers may have a deeper understanding of how entertainment is evolving in the 21st century than any other company.

Like Nintendo's fabulously popular Wii console, this new version of Nintendo's handheld DS, succeeds because it reminds us what fun can mean. And it does so in an immediately accessible way.

Yes, there are the requisite cosmetic improvements. The DSi, which will sell for US\$169.99 (RM610), is a bit thinner and has slightly larger screens than its predecessor, the DS Lite. That's nice, but hardly earth-shattering. The big technical leap is that the DSi adds two cameras, a removable media card slot and the ability to play digital music. (It still plays any of the more than 800 DS games.)

Any other company would have been satisfied to add new hardware features. But Nintendo's genius lies in understanding that people increasingly crave interaction in their entertainment, not only with products but with other people. And beyond merely allowing you to decide what to shoot or what to listen to, a digital camera or an iPod does not provide an interactive experience.

With an iPod you are not actually interacting with the music; you are merely listening. Likewise, most digital cameras merely capture images. They do not even pretend to try to make playing around with the images as much fun as taking them.

These are precisely the areas that make the DSi so innovative. The DSi transforms pictures and music from static artifacts into the raw material for hours of hilarity – on a bus, on a beach, in a bar, in a park or even at home, where you might think there would be no niche for a handheld device.

As far as pictures go, the DSi is not trying to be a camera buff's camera. Its resolution is sufficient for Facebook but hardly for serious portraiture. (One camera faces inward, toward the user, while the other points outward.)



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But then the joy of the DSi's camera function is in distorting pictures, comparing your face with that of a friend, adding funny sunglasses or noses or moustaches to a picture. It is in creating carnival-style photo cutouts so you can easily superimpose the face of one friend on the body of another.

This is not professional image-editing. It is, however, just the sort of thing that any group of friends of any age should be able to sit around laughing and playing with for hours.

The photo play in the DSi is a bit more obvious in its appeal, but the music and sound functions are perhaps even more impressive.

They start with the ability to record audio clips with the built-in microphone. Then you can start changing the pitch and tempo independently (for example, just making something faster doesn't necessarily make it higher). Then you can play it backward.

That's fun, but you have even more powers. You play your own voiceovers on top of real digital audio tracks. You add congas or cymbals or drums or hand claps or shoe taps to the beat of your favourite songs. While you're playing along, maybe you're also controlling a mini Mario game, in which the coins Mario needs to collect represent the wavelengths of the music itself.

These are all experiences you can enjoy

with friends because the DSi has built-in speakers, unlike most music players. Or you can just plug in headphones, close the DSi's lid and make it your full-time personal music player. (It can access songs copied from an iTunes folder to a digital media card.)

Many of the interactive functions of the DSi are available as parts of full-fledged computer programs. The DSi, however, makes them portable and easier to use.

By focusing on simple, infectious enjoyable activities for friends rather than on expensive graphics technology, the DSi appeals in almost the same manner as the Wii does for the home console. In that arena, Sony and Microsoft were so busy thinking about hardcore, big-budget games that the simple idea of creating a virtual bowling alley in millions of living rooms didn't occur to them. Similarly, the DSi makes most other portable game machines and digital music players seem downright unimaginative.

Nintendo has already sold more than 100 million units since introducing the original DS in 2004. With the DSi, the company will almost certainly extend its lead over Sony's PlayStation Portable. Indeed, the company that should be most concerned about the DSi is not Sony but Apple.

Let the clash of the portable media titans begin. – NYT